NARRATIVES OF RECOVERY: TRAUMA, HISTORY, AND THE USE OF THE SUPERNATURAL IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS

By

LORRAINE OUIMET

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Lorraine Ouimet

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Chair: David Leverenz
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The past thirty years have brought forth a vibrant renaissance of visual and literary art dealing with the horrors of slavery. Clearly, contemporary African American artists are participating in a (re)writing/righting of history. I propose that more than attempting to recover the past, many of these contemporary narratives of slavery also aim at a recovery *from* the past. Psychoanalytical literature dealing with trauma, when read alongside the African American novels, films, plays, and art exhibition under study in this project, brings out features that reveal the presence of cycles of trauma and recovery.

Beyond sharing similarities with psychoanalytic texts, these Narratives of Recovery share a certain device: All make use of the supernatural. These authors/artists use the fantastic to collapse 5boundaries between the past and the present, endowing the past with an immediacy that renders it more accessible, transformable, and ultimately, recoverable. This blurring of temporal boundaries results in a constant "replay" of the

past into the present, which resembles the flashbacks experienced by victims of trauma, a mechanism triggered naturally by the body in order to prevent the repression of traumatic events and to allow for a process of healing to take place. Through a psychoanalytical framework, this project interacts with literary, dramatic, and cinematographic texts for the purpose of illuminating African Americans' and Americans' relationship(s) to the legacy of slavery. Ultimately, it aspires to enrich the meaning of Narratives of Recovery by juxtaposing their reading against a compatible, perhaps even catalytic, analytical tool that makes salient the injuries scarring the American past and present.

This dissertation considers the supernatural as a narrative device that makes visible the presence of trauma in the works of such artists as Terri Adkins, Octavia Butler, Haile Gerima, Charles Johnson, Kasi Lemmons, Suzan-Lori Parks, Gloria Naylor, and Jewell Parker Rhodes. It considers the particular cultural, historical, and social setting from which these Narratives arise. At the core of the project stands the premise that distinctive links exist between the themes and devices found in recent African American cultural productions and specific aspects of psychoanalytical theory, particularly symptoms of trauma and recovery processes.

CHAPTER 1
RECOVERING (FROM) THE PAST

Introduction

Recent African American cultural productions and scholarship of African American studies pay much attention to the project of "rewriting history." While the impulse to rewrite the past draws from various sources, many critics focus on the artists' revisionist concern with writing/righting history, and with recovering a past lost in the waters of the Middle Passage and in the horrors of slavery and racism. I am interested in the "why" behind this rewriting of history. I propose that more than attempting to recover the past, many of these narratives also aim at a recovery *from* the past. Psychoanalytical literature dealing with trauma, when read alongside such texts as Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day,* Octavia Butler's *Kindred,* Haile Gerima's *Sankofa,* Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* and *Oxherding Tale,* Kasi Lemmons's *Eve's Bayou,* Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams*, and Susan Lori Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World,* brings out features that signal the presence of cycles of trauma and recovery.

Beyond sharing similarities with psychoanalytic texts, these narratives–I refer to them as Narratives of Recovery–share a certain device: all make use of the supernatural. This element constitutes a shift in genre for the black narrative traditions. Most African American artists have consistently demonstrated a commitment to creating art that evokes factuality, starting with the slave narratives of the 18th and 19th century. Since the 1980s,

however, there has been a movement away from realism toward a less limiting and constricting genre, one that incorporates elements of the supernatural.

To explain the possible causes for this shift, I argue that the use of the supernatural in these narratives fulfills both agendas of recovery, that of reappropriating the past and that of healing the wounds inflicted by its traumatic events. In the cultural productions that I am investigating, the artists use the fantastic to collapse the boundaries between the past and the present. The past then becomes endowed with an immediacy, one that renders it more accessible, transformable, and ultimately, recoverable. This blurring of temporal boundaries results in a constant "replay" of the past into the present. The process resembles the flashbacks and memories experienced by victims of trauma, a mechanism triggered naturally by the body in order to prevent the repression of traumatic events and to allow for a process of healing to take place.

Indeed, memory performs a similar function; the act of remembering also transposes the past into the present, giving it a quality of immediacy, a concept dramatized in such contemporary African American texts as Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman.* In Gaines' novel, Miss Pitman, who has lived for 110 years, recollects not only the painful memories of slavery, but also the memories of emancipation, reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, and finally the black militancy of the 60s. But Narratives of Recovery differ from such contemporary models of anamnesis. The characters in *Voodoo Dreams*, *Kindred,* and *Praisesong for the Widow,* for example, do not choose to recollect as much as they are forced to. Like victims of traumatic occurrences, these characters are constantly subjected to a flow of painful, disturbing, and uncontrollable memories–memories of slavery and of the Middle Passage.

The movement away from realism enables the telling of traumatic memories in yet another way. Most victims of trauma experience a surge of memories that often appear in surprising forms –disconnected, in pieces, distorted–making them very difficult to "narrate." The use of the supernatural provides the authors with the flexibility to translate the fragmented, disembodied flow of memories from "non-narratable" to "narratable" form. Traumatic memories are unusual–they are not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative easily assimilated into an ongoing life story. While the victim's impulse is to repress the disturbing memories, the flashbacks force him or her to remember, for "to return fully to the self as socially defined, to establish a relationship again with the world, the survivor must tell what happened. This is the function of narrative."[1] Only once these memories have been organized and integrated into a story can the victim begin to face and heal the trauma.

Avey Johnson, the protagonist of Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, cannot control the flow of memories–which manifest themselves in the forms of dreams, flashbacks, and bizarre hallucinations–that come flooding over her during a Caribbean cruise. For example, while staring over the railing at the sports deck below, her mind replays an event that she and her husband had witnessed from their apartment window when still a young couple living in Harlem: the beating of a black man by a white police officer,

> for a long minute she stood gripping the railing, trying to steady herself and clear her head. Where had that night surfaced from? How could she, after all these years, hear the thud and crack of the billy and the man's screams so clearly? Her ears, her memory seemed to be playing the same frightening tricks as her eyes. What had come over her all of a sudden? (56-7)

[1] Roberta Culbertson, "Embodied Memory, 179.

A series of flashbacks and troubling dreams, which she is unable to explain, incites her to cut short her seventeen-day cruise and to catch a flight back home to New York from the next port of call, the island of Grenada. However, before returning home she will participate in the Carriacou excursion, a two-day celebration that takes place on the small island every year to honor the African ancestors.

On the trip from Grenada to Carriacou on a small schooner, Avey undergoes her most troubling confrontation with the past. During her voyage at sea, she experiences a traumatic recall of memories that are not hers. Here, the temporal scheme of Marshall's narrative splits into multiple levels of past and present, which are superimposed and experienced simultaneously. The short sea voyage across the channel between the two islands prompts recollections of the experiences of her ancestors who, stolen from Africa and brought to the New World on slave ships, are/were crossing the Middle Passage. Overwhelmed by what appeared, on the surface, to be a common attack of seasickness, Avey experiences the horrific realities of her ancestors who, packed in the overcrowded hull of a slave ship, amidst dead bodies, faeces, vomit, rats, snakes, and hundreds of horrified Africans, were transported to the New World, never again to return to their land, their families.

> it was nearing dusk and the *Emanuel C* was almost to port when the pall over Avey Johnson's mind lifted momentarily and she became dimly conscious. She was alone in the deckhouse. That much she was certain of. Yet she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling her head. Their suffering–the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space–made hers of no consequence. (209)

What Avey experiences resembles a symptom of traumatic injury documented by Bessel A.Van Der Kolk, who argues that victims of trauma have great difficulty bridging

a traumatic event with their current lives. "This suggests a permanent duality, not exactly a split or doubling but a parallel existence." The patient, Van Der Kolk documents, often switches back and forth between the traumatic experience and his or her current life, reporting on both without synchronization, "not a *sequence* but a *simultaneity.*" This simultaneity demonstrates the way in which traumatic experiences or memories defy normal notions of temporality–they are at once past and present.[2] Dori Laub, cofounder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, and himself a Holocaust survivor, describes the phenomenon in similar terms. He contends that,

> trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not end, did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both. [3]

In "Truth and Testimony," Laub argues that even though the teller feels a consuming imperative to be heard, his or her story "cannot be fully captured in *thought*, *memory*, and *speech*" (emphasis his). So how to tell it? Words are often inadequate, even untrustworthy tools to fully communicate the experience of trauma (63). Roberta Culberston agrees that traumatic memories are often hard to communicate, since they often do not make sense on a linguistic level. When "such gross tools as language are brought to bear on the experience," she writes, "the result appears to be metaphor" (176). She explains that traumatic memories are at times not really "remembered," but rather simply "felt as a presence," and this presence more often than not "obeys the logic of dreams rather than speech." Her own traumatic childhood memories manifest themselves

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[2] Bessel A.Van Der Kolk in Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* 177.

[3] Laub and Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing*, 69.

in the form of disconnected and fragmented images, sounds, and feelings, sometimes recognizable, sometimes not, almost always in need of interpretation. In addition, involved in this process of recollection is a sense of distance between the victim and his or her memories.

The characters in Narratives of Recovery also experience this sense of distance between themselves and the memories they are recollecting. In fact, the distance is amplified by the fact that these memories are not theirs–a crucial point which I will address in more detail later in this introduction as well as in chapter II. Yet, the process of recovering (from) the memories of their ancestors creates an intimacy between those who are recollecting the traumas and those who experienced them first-hand. The victims and those who are recollecting their memories often become one and the same, a theme creatively explored in Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams.* Marie Laveau often *becomes* her ancestors when, during voodoo ceremonies, they enter her and possess her. At times, Marie is possessed by her deceased mother, also named Marie Laveau. On those occasions, the two women become one, and the younger Marie experiences her mother's traumas as her own.

Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams* is a fictionalized account of the life of Marie Laveau, a voodoo queen who lived in New Orleans in the 1880s. Marie Laveau is the fourth of a line of women chosen by the snake god Damballah to keep voodoo alive in the New World. Damballah, who possesses Marie during voodoo ceremonies, only chooses women as a vehicle of his powers because, unlike men, they "birthed themselves–woman to woman–in a chain as old as creation. The lines went backwards and forwards to Eve. The snake itself was a never ending circle." The past here is kept alive through a

powerful medium–the umbilical cord–and is constantly maintained by a circular movement of mother to daughter, over and over again. The repetitive naming here also helps emphasize this cyclic movement: Marie's great grandmother, grandmother and mother are all named Marie. And the child to whom Marie will give birth will also be named Marie.

There is a wonderful passage in the novel where, through the use of the supernatural, the past and the present become joined. During a voodoo ceremony on the shores of lake Ponchartain, Marie, in a trance and possessed by Damballah, walks towards the beach and enters the water. While underwater, she undergoes a powerful experience of recovery: immersed under the waters of the lake, she encounters Agwé, the sea god, pulling behind him a ship filled with black people. All are calling for Marie to come on board, including Grandmère (now deceased) who, from the stern of the ship, is shouting "Home. Let's go home." Next to Grandmère, steering the rudder, stands Marie's mother accompanied by Marie's unborn daughter, as well as by Membe, her great grandmother, who tells her "You are me." Marie steps on board and, at this moment, the past joins with the present and future; and as the present and future merge with the past, time becomes circular. The following quote demonstrates both the collapsing of temporal boundaries and the circularity of timelines in the novel:

> *the women and child formed a circle with Marie in the center, its heart. And around their circle, the other passengers formed circles around circles until they all clung together weeping and singing and praising the core of their multiplying circles–Marie Laveau possessed by Damballah.* (306) [italics in original]

Through this experience of recovery, Damballah "had shown her how to reconnect herself to both past and future" (307).

Jewell Parker Rhodes's second historical novel, *Magic City,* performs a similar blurring of temporal boundaries, but this time through the trope of recurring traumatic dreams. The novel is an imaginative rendering of the 1921 Tulsa Riot. It imagines the details of the events, mainly absent from historical records, which may have led to the bombing of Greenwood, a thriving black community known as the Negro Wall Street. The author came across a short article titled "The Only U.S. City Bombed from the Air," citing, in no more than a few paragraphs, that a black shoeshine boy from Greenwood had been accused of assaulting a white female elevator operator. From that short article, she creates *Magic City.*

Unlike the other texts, this novel is not a narrative of slavery or of the Middle Passage. Yet Joe Samuels, the black protagonist later to be accused of raping white Mary Keane, is obsessed with Houdini, who, in this novel, stands as an emblem of escape and freedom. Joe carries with him at all times a pair of handcuffs out of which, like Houdini, he has learned to release himself. The handcuffs here are a powerful symbol of enslavement. This symbol of enslavement, as well as the novel's powerful motif of lynching, a threat that slaves faced even after emancipation, invite me to read *Magic City* as a slave narrative.

Tulsa during the 1920s was a stronghold of KKK activism. This explains why Joe's nights are plagued by recurring dreams of "thick smoke wash[ing] over him, as flames peeled back his skin, consuming his swollen hands, leaving charred bone dangling in the cuffs" (6). Joe's dreams are easily recognizable as traumatic–dreams are usually symbolic, the meaning camouflaged beneath layers of signs and codes. Joe's dreams are literal, they reproduce, in agonizing detail, the traumatic realities of lynching.

Interestingly, Joe experiences these dreams without having himself gone through the trauma. He will, later in the novel, experience the threat of lynching, as the white mob that has been pursuing him after the incident with Marie Keane in the elevator catches up with him and prepares to lynch him. But the police chief, believing in Joe's innocence, succeeds in buying him some time and rescues him from the mob. During these traumatic dreams, Joe ultimately experiences the collective memory of all the black men who were and are (at the time of the novel) systematically being burned alive by the white supremacists of the KKK.

. . . one of them hits Sixo in the head with his rifle and when he comes to, a hickory fire is in front of him and he is tied at the waist to a tree. . . by the light of the hominy fire Sixo straightens. He is through with his song. He laughs. A rippling sound like Sethe's sons make when they tumble in hay or splash in rainwater. His feet are cooking; the cloth of his trousers smokes.

Joe's recurring dream collapses the boundaries between past and present, and between the personal and the collective, inasmuch as it symbolizes the repeated death of black men spanning from the moment they were brought to America in chains to well into the 1930s. At the same time, the dream is prophetic and therefore merges the present and the future. It prophesizes Joe's own barely avoided lynching, as well as the symbolic lynching of the whole town, the city of Greenwood, burnt alive by the white citizens of Tulsa.

The coming to terms with traumatic experiences can be paradoxical. At the heart of it operates a dialectic relationship between the need to deny or keep secret the horrible events and the need to divulge them loudly, publicly. The imperative to tell the memories

that assail the victims of trauma, unlike the impulse to repress them, is crucial to the process of recovery. The healing element of the act of telling lies in the experience of "living through" the testimony. The words enable a reliving of the events. During the course of his countless interviews, Laub observed that survivors did not only need to tell their stories in order to survive, "they needed to survive so that they could tell their stories." They found the strength and courage to survive in their desire to live to tell the story, a story that would otherwise not be told. Yet traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context. Rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images–a form difficult to translate or convert into an intelligible, *realist(ic)* narrative. The victims are incapable of organizing the events on a linguistic level–because these events, in the words of Sethe, have no "word-shapes"[4]–"and this failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level: as somatic sensations, behavioral reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks." [5]

If pain and trauma can lead to "levels of experience beyond the ordinary" and can enter the realm of the "nonordinary," "the mystical," "the supranormal," [6] why then should the narratives testifying to these experiences not be endowed with the same characteristics? If the memories "take on a cast of unreality," should not the narratives attempting to articulate them, translate them, also take on the same cast? The use of the supernatural as a narrative device provides an alternative to "translating" the traumatic memories into a form necessarily recognizable as "realist." The ways in which the

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[4] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 99.

[5] Bessel A.Van Der Kolk in Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 172.

[6] Roberta Culbertson, "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-establishing the Self," 176.

narratives merge the "real" of the traumas of slavery with their peculiar "unreal" manifestations could be defined as a *psychological realism*, an aesthetic which aims to communicate both the very real experiences of trauma *and* the psychological forces that shape the way these traumas are experienced by the victims.

In the opening paragraphs of this introduction, I refer to the black literary traditions' relationship to the realist aesthetic. I would like, at this point, to briefly expand on this categorization. In chapter II, I legitimize, as well as problematize, this assertion by tracing the development of the black literary traditions from the moment of their inception in the slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To characterize the slave narrative genre as "realist" undermines the complexity of its sophisticated attempt at gaining recognition within the landscape of nineteenth-century literature. Indeed, the ex-slaves documenting their ordeal and escape for a (mostly) white audience could not develop their narratives without a commitment to truth and facticity. The success of the abolitionist movement depended on the credibility of the ex-slaves' accounts, on the veracity of the journeys from slavery to freedom that they claimed to truthfully document. There would not have been any slave narratives without a clear commitment to the realist aesthetic. Yet, as the chapter attempts to demonstrate, it is hardly possible to place the slave narrative, or the subsequent post-emancipation African American texts firmly, within the realist aesthetic, or any other defined or defining aesthetic.[7] Because African American literary and cultural productions, classic or contemporary, cannot be *contained* within a specific genre, I will define it by using a

[7] Certainly, the slave narrative genre could constitute an exception to my argument, since it is considered a genre of its own. Yet even the conventions of this genre, Winifred Morgan argues, vary considerably between male or female authored texts. See "Gender-Related Difference in the Slave Narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass."

concept of "excess"–a concept which will echo throughout the various readings of the texts under analysis in this book. The slave narrative exceeds the conventions of its genre by incorporating elements of the romantic, sentimentalist, and travel narrative genres. Reconstruction and post reconstruction narratives, as well as the novels from the turn of the century, the Harlem Renaissance, and from the later periods of black nationalism, into the contemporary postmodern era, continue this cross-fertilization of narrative conventions and devices to craft texts which exist in excess of clearly defined dominant aesthetic traditions.

Chapter 2, "The Master's Tools: African American Writing and American Literary Realism," addresses this strategic conglomeration, or overlap, of elements from multiple genres. This chapter considers the many challenges encountered by the slave narrative upon its emergence on the period's literary scene. It engages with the ways in which African American authors manipulated the dominant genres of romanticism, sentimentalism, and realism to successfully support and promote their struggle for freedom.

Chapter 3, "Travelling (Through) Trauma: Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Haile Gerima's *Sankofa*," engages with the Narratives of Recovery which recreate in fictional modes the very real traumas suffered by the authors' ancestors. The characters in these texts exist in a zone between Africa and America, and between the past and the present, or in a place where both geographical locations and temporalities are experienced simultaneously–*in excess* of any one time and place. The narratives also exist between reality and fantasy, or between history and fiction–a positioning which becomes particularly problematic in light of recent criticism about the dangers of erasing the

traumas of the past through the postmodern impulse of dissolving the boundaries between history and fiction.

In chapter 4, I highlight a pattern of traumatic repetitions that I see operating in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day,* Susan Lori Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World,* and Kasi Lemmons's *Eve's Bayou.* The traumatic recurrences invading the lives of the characters of all three texts suggest the presence of unhealed traumas as they trickle down the various ancestral lines. Traumatic events repeat themselves not only in the lives of individual characters, but also in the lives of their descendants, creating an overlap effect. Repetitive events in these texts manifest themselves *in excess* of one particular character's life; they cannot be contained within the confines of one particular life span.

Chapter 5, "Dangerous Intimacies: Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams* and Johnson's *Middle Passage* and *Oxherding Tale*," explores the dissolution of temporal, spatial, and human boundaries as they collapse under the weight of dangerous intimacies; it contemplates what happens when things, people, and events so perfectly overlap as to merge into one entity. The paradigmatic representation of this process of merging is undoubtedly the fictional Allmuseri tribe in Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*. This ancient African clan abides by a philosophy of "universalism" that does not account for divisions or autonomy. In fact, the clan's language and philosophy lack the verbal or conceptual representation of such notions as I, you, mine, or yours. For the members of the clan, the one is embedded in the all. A similar process of accumulatedness operates in Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams*. Every female descendant of the original voodoo queen Marie Laveau continues to carry the same name, creating a merging of all

four women into one elongated lifetime, one entity even. This intimate coalescence of Maries is emphasized by the invasion or appropriation of each other's bodies when, for example, Marie's deceased mother enters her daughter's body while she is in trance.

The absence of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* from my discussions of contemporary narratives of slavery may trouble some of my readers. Indeed, *Beloved*–partly due to the volume of critical attention it has received since its publication in 1987–could be considered the paradigmatic text that recreates the historical realities of slavery by choosing, as its aesthetic, the supernatural over the more conventional documentary genre of realism. But precisely because of the amount of attention it has received, I have chosen to consider other texts that are somewhat eclipsed by *Beloved's* well-deserved prominence. Nonetheless, any attempt to keep the specter of Morrison's lush, moving prose, visceral characters, and brilliant storytelling from gliding, floating, weaving in and out of my text would be futile. *Beloved's* ghostly presence will surreptitiously haunt my project, its echoes joining in with those resonating through the contemporary African American cultural productions.

The literary and visual Narratives of Recovery, as well as my readings and viewings of them, hover in the interstitial zones between Africa and America, between the past and the present, in spaces where things do not quite reach, reunite, or connect, or in places where they intimately overlap.

Methodolog(ics)

Although the authors of the Narratives of Recovery, and even some of their protagonists, are not themselves the victims of the traumas they are narrating, psychoanalytic literature on trauma is relevant to my study. I will be drawing on various sources, including studies documenting the traumatic experiences of the Holocaust, of

long-term captivity, and of rape and incest. Each of these sources documents a form of trauma possibly experienced by slaves: both slavery and the Holocaust were collective traumas; the symptoms of long-term captivity victims informs the possible injuries of slaves who were held captive, more often than not, for a lifetime; finally, slave women often endured the additional traumas of sexual abuse.[8]

The process of investigating the traumatic injuries that slavery may have left on subsequent generations of African Americans is surely feasible.[9] The transgenerational nature of trauma has been well documented by psychologists, sociologists, and clinicians, a phenomenon explored in more depth in chapter two. Yolanda Gampel describes trauma as possessing a "radioactive" component. Once it has "infiltrated the parent's intrasubjective space and exists in his or her unconscious," it is often "deposited by way of the parent's intersubjective space into the child through transgenerational transmission."[10] Laura Brown asserts that trauma can also be transmitted laterally through the members of an oppressed social group, "when membership in that group means a constant lifetime risk of exposure to certain trauma."[11] The formation of powerful political movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, has facilitated the lateral transmission of trauma inasmuch as these political movements revolved around the traumas of black oppression, encouraging their

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[8] While I'm not aware of any study documenting the sexual abuse of male slaves, and although none of the Narratives of Recovery that I investigate make any reference to male sexual abuse by their white masters, black men most certainly experienced this trauma as well.

[9] Imminently, scholars of the Holocaust, like scholars of slavery, will have as primary sources only narratives, rather than first-hand testimonies, from which to study the psychological effects of this more recent collective trauma.

[10] Yolanda Gampel, "Reflections on the Prevalence of the Uncanny in Social Violence," 61.

[11] Laura S. Brown "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," 107-8.

participants to share, recognize, and fight a common experience of victimization. Traces of the unhealed traumas of slavery still linger today, mostly because the various forms of institutionalized racism implemented after the abolition of slavery made difficult the creation of a space from which freed slaves could begin to heal. The enduring traumas of slavery are felt, or accessed, by the artists considered here through their participation in or exposure to contemporary political movements, and/or through connections with ancestors, often achieved by means of the supernatural in their art. [12]

The reading of the chosen Narratives of Recovery through a psychoanalytical framework may be deemed problematic on various levels. The cautiousness of many theorists and critics concerning the use of psychoanalytical approaches to the reading of literature of collective trauma, or of historical narratives, testifies to both the potential values and failures of such an analytical tool. Furthermore, the vociferous yet justified denunciation of psychoanalysis as "ahistorical and politically naïve," [13] and as a theory too deeply rooted in white bourgeois ideology to adequately address the needs of women and blacks, further complicates its application to the reading of Narratives of Recovery– which are essentially texts that engage with the depiction of collective traumas, from a historical perspective, predominantly written by African American women.

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[12] Ashraf Rushdy, in *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form,* analyzes the influence of specific shifts in historiography on African American literature. His research investigates contemporary narratives of slavery, and thoroughly delineates the climate–social, political, cultural, literary–which fostered their insurgence. Rushdy situates the development of the Neo-slave narratives within the vibrant setting of the 1960s. The emergence of the Black Power movement and the rise of the New Left social history during this period prompted a shift in the way historians were to look at, and subsequently represent, slavery. The shift in the historiographical representation of slavery is crucial, Rushdy insists, to the formation of a new discourse on racial politics, out of which Neo-slave narratives arise, and to which they contribute and respond.

[13] Christopher Lane, *The Psychoanalysis of Race,* 2.

Yet many historians, literary and cultural critics, feminists, and race theorists have opted against throwing away the baby of psychoanalysis with the bathwater of its fallible theoretical applications. William Langer, for example, declares that historians often rely on psychoanalytical models in their research, inasmuch as they "must be particularly concerned with the problem whether major changes in the psychology of a society or culture can be traced, even in part, to some severe trauma suffered in common."[14] Erik Erikson has demonstrated the possibility for a merging of historical and psychoanalytical approaches in his study of the relationship between the Black Death epidemic and the success of Luther as a religious leader able to provide his followers "with an acceptable solution to their religious problem."[15] In fact, for Hans Meyerhoff, "the basic project of psychoanalysis is historical. It consists of discovering the past as it survives in the present life of the patient. This is possible because of memory . . . the clinical situation is essentially an historical situation . . . . It consists in remembering, recording, and reconstructing a significant slice of human history: the patient's history as uncovered in interaction with the therapist."[16]

Race theorists, such as Claudia Tate, acknowledge the difficulties of applying psychoanalytic theory to the study of race. Nonetheless, she recognizes the potential value of certain approaches and constructs her own "critical model by referring to basic Freudian, object relations, Lacanian theories about the development of the personality as well as to black literary and cultural criticism" (12). Ultimately, "rather than simply denounc[ing] psychoanalysis or regard it as a metadiscourse, [she] tries to understand its

[14] William Langer, quoted in Nellie L. Thompson, 150.

[15] Erikson quoted in Nellie L. Thompson, 150.

[16] Thompson, 151.

own compensatory defenses by questioning the cultural effects of its Jewish origins in anti-Semitic Austria at the turn of the 20th century" (16). Hortense Spillers concedes that "little or nothing in the intellectual history of African Americans within the social and political context of the United States suggests the effectiveness of a psychoanalytic discourse, revised or classical, in illuminating the problematic of 'race' on an intersubjective field of play." Yet, she also expresses concern at the slow pace with which black cultural scholars are willing to "invade [psychoanalysis'] hereditary premises and insulations, and open its insights to cultural and social formations that are disjunctive to its originary imperatives."[17] She considers the possibility that the issues confronting psychoanalytic and race theories against one another may be depolarized with the Du Boisian notion of double consciousness, which may "recover the socio-political dimensions that classical psychoanalysis and its aftermath sutured in a homogeneity of class interests." She locates a solution to psychoanalysis' dysfunctional application to race in the construction of a relationship between social positioning vis-à-vis discourse.[18] Similarly, Christopher Lane devotes his recent volume, *The Psychoanalysis of Race,* to the task of addressing and redressing some of the shortcomings, or misunderstandings, of psychoanalytical theories. The essays collected in his book demonstrate the constructive and productive ways in which psychoanalytical approaches can and should be applied to the study of race and racism.

Many feminist critics have also chosen to find ways to exploit psychoanalysis' potential. As Jean Walton explains, "feminist theory has been . . . invigorated by psychoanalytic discourse" partly "because Freud's writings, despite their susceptibility to

[17] Hortense Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be by Now," 135.

[18] Spillers, 143-4.

be read biologistically, posit sexual difference as the ambivalent outcome of psychosocial processes, rather than a pregiven trait" (5). Yet Freud's renunciation of the seduction theory in favor of fantasy constitutes, for many feminist critics, a troubling act of betrayal. Underlining this change in Freud's approach to diagnosing his female patients' hysterical illnesses was the insinuation that his patients had not *really* been raped or sexually abused. Jeffrey Masson's 1984 book, *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Suppression of the Seduction Theory* proclaims such a betrayal, arguing that Freud was initially correct in his findings about the staggering occurrences of rape and incest in the lives of his female patients. Other critics have a more tempered position toward Freud's rethinking of his seduction theory. Pamela Thurschwell contends that:

> Freud never discards the structure and logic of the seduction theory, which he returns to again and again. Nor does he ever deny the reality of child abuse. But psychoanalysis, as Freud conceives it, concerns itself with the realm of fantasy. Events may happen, or they may not, but fantasized relations to these events and non-events always *do* happen, and it is in this realm of relations that the work of psychoanalysis takes place. (116) [19]

Indeed, Thurschwell astutely demonstrates that the vexed relationship between psychoanalysis' emphasis on fantasy and the actual events that may traumatize a person's life have led to serious contentions against the validity of psychoanalysis. "Critics have accused psychoanalysis of ignoring the effects of history or the 'real event' that impinges upon a person from the outside, in favor of psychical reality–the inner desires, fantasies and repressions which are equivalent to reality for the subject"(5). Clearly, the privileging of fantasy over reality weakens the expediency of psychoanalysis as a tool for the study of such traumas as slavery. Slavery did happen. Incontestably, it belongs to the realm of "real events that impinged upon millions of persons from the outside." And its position

[19] Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology, and Magical Thinking,* 5.

as a "real event" must be acknowledged unequivocally if any healing work is to be performed. The social and political climate of the 20th and 21st centuries–especially in the midst of various healing and compensatory movements such as demands for reparations and Affirmative Action programs–requires that the legacy of slavery be handled with considerable respect for the crushing reality with which slavery was experienced by its victims and for the persistency with which it continues to echo through subsequent generations. The predominant impulse, among many African Americans as well as white people, has been to minimize the injurious weightiness of more than two hundred years of abuse, cruelties, and partial extermination of Africans, for the purpose of protecting the culture which still benefits today from the actions of its white, colonizing ancestors–a culture still reluctant to amend the wrongs of its past.

This unstable positioning of traumatic occurrences between the realms of *real* and *psychic* reality is closely related to another distinction within Freudian psychoanalysis that also affects its efficacy when dealing with such traumas as slavery, namely, the distinction between the 'actual neuroses' [*Aktualneurosen*] and the 'psychoneuroses' [*Neuropsychosen*]. Terry Harpold and Kavita Philip refer to this distinction as a "double temporality," inasmuch as any manifesting neurosis always finds its source in an event *prior* to the one which seems to have triggered the psychosis:

> the analysand's symptoms are always expressions of both the actual and the original, even when the original seems no to be relevant to the present situation. The present, objective condition of suffering is overdetermined by residues of the past; the persistence of the past is adapted all too efficiently to the conditions of the present. Any assessment of the 'real' situation of the analysand must take into account an originary excess, something which makes no sense in the present, but to which everything in the present is bound.[20]

[20] Terry Harpold, Kavita Philip, "Party Over," 25-6.

The originary excess, or primal scene as it is referred to in classical psychoanalysis, finds its firm grounding in childhood sexuality, within the realm of a 'nuclear' family. And here again the application of psychoanalysis for the study of race finds its back against the wall. African Americans' condition under slavery is characterized by its denied, indeed forbidden, access to owning and caring for children, therefore preventing any possibility for the creation of a familial unit resembling the model used as a research base for psychoanalysis. This severing of familial bonds under slavery still affects the culture of African American families, a legacy carefully detailed and documented in Orlando Patterson's recent *Rituals of Blood.*

The transference of the cause of any traumatic symptoms to a prior perturbing event creates problems for the study of collective traumas, since it implies the unlikelihood that individuals, or the collectivity to which they belong, could be traumatized by a catastrophe such as the Middle Passage or slavery. Rather, such traumatic occurrences would simply reactivate, or bring to the surface, an earlier sexual trauma suffered by the victim, most probably during childhood for, in psychoanalysis, sexuality consists of "the primary source of the psychological disorder which [creates] uncanny effects" in the lives of victims.[21]

Ashraf Rushdy proposes that, as a possible solution to this problem, we may redefine the notion of primal scenes into a trauma that "need not be sexual: it need only be of such significance that an individual would recollect that episode, and not another, at the crucial moment when driven to reevaluate her or his life."[22] Indeed, if any psychoanalytic framework is to be applied to the study of the traumatic effects of slavery,

[21] Thurschwell, 118.

[22] Ashraf Rushdy, " 'Rememory': Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels," 302.

we must understand slavery and its multitude of internal traumas–dislocation, dehumanization, separation from family members, rape and incest, physical and mental violence, as well as the constant threat of such violence–as producing sometimes debilitating, overwhelming, and enduring traumatic injuries, independently of a victim's sexual development.

Following Rushdy's lead, I consider the authors of Narratives of Recovery in this project as involved in a process of reevaluating their personal life as well as their collective experience of a forcefully displaced people, through the recollection of the traumatic episodes of slavery and the Middle Passage–the (collective) primal scenes marking theirs and their ancestors' presence in the New World.

I would like to briefly address a final potential concern about my choice of a psychoanalytical framework for the reading of the use of the supernatural in contemporary African American art. Freud's attempt to keep psychoanalysis and the occult in impervious categories has been well documented. My approach challenges rather than respects Freud's desire to keep the two fields distinctively separate. Freud's concern revolved around the fear that psychoanalysis may become contaminated by what he considered the pseudo-scientific, popular, and certainly questionable nature of the occult, or the paranormal. As Pamela Thurschwell argues,

> the potentially muddying incursion of occult knowledge into psychoanalysis would make it difficult to see psychoanalysis as a science, something that cures through a proven and repeatable methodology–the discovery of repressed sexuality, the removal of symptoms, etc.–rather than through a mystical faith in a healer-analyst. If analysts were prophets or mind-readers, then, as Francois Roustang has pointed out, the transference would never end. (121)

Because Chapter 4 will deal with this apparent dilemma in detail, I will only say for now that Freud's concern for the tainting of his research by the occult was also characterized

by a deep fascination with supranormal phenomena. In fact, his study of fantasy included a phylogenetic theory that recognized the passing down, or transference, of thoughts or traumatic injury from one member of a group to his or her immediate or removed descendants. This is where the two fields of investigation threaten one another: the mystery of thought transference formed, at least in the nineteenth century, the basis of psychic phenomena.

Notwithstanding the various obstacles impinging upon the application of psychoanalysis to the reading of Narratives of Recovery, it is impossible to overlook the ways in which psychoanalysis helps us to *read more deeply* the signs at work in these particular texts. Literature can, as Ronald Granofsky keenly observes in *The Trauma Novel,* penetrate through the shared and communal to get to the personal; "the nature of fiction is such that the collective [disaster] will be portrayed in individual terms." Fiction is given license to explore and represent the ways in which the collective "leave[s] its traces on the individual." [23]

The authors of Narratives of Recovery, like good analysts, have unriddled and unmuddled the narratives they imagined their ancestors would have told. They have recomposed these narratives in such a way as to conserve, through the use of the supernatural, their original (traumatic) form, by incorporating such characteristics as lack of cohesion, of chronology, or of coherence.

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[23] Ronald Granofsky, *The Trauma Novel: Contemporary Symbolic Depiction of Collective Disaster,* 5-6. Some literary scholars understand literature as a precursor, an inspiration even, to psychoanalysis. Freud has himself confessed that "the works of imaginative writers" have often helped him gain insight into the workings of mental processes. Walter Kendrick writes that "during the century or so before psychoanalysis was born, imaginative writers were moving steadily in the very direction that Freud himself would take– toward an understanding of the mind as a multilayered, complexly interrelated structure, in which impulses move in mutual ignorance and often at cross-purpose" (98).

The use of psychoanalytic tools through which to read Narratives of Recovery becomes less problematic in light of the similarities between psychoanalysis and literature, at least after we perform certain adjustments, such as those proposed by Rushdy–namely to desexualize and deinfantilize the nature of primal scenes. Furthermore, the acceptance of the transgenerational nature of trauma supports the assumption that these texts may indeed be exposing a degree of unhealed injuries that continue to scar African American culture. In fact, the presence of traces of trauma in contemporary African American art signals, if not personal psychic injury, certainly cultural damage. Erickson defines the difference:

> by individual trauma I mean a **blow** to the psyche that **breaks through** one's **defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively** . . . By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social [fabric] that **damages** the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with "trauma." **But it is a form of shock all the same**, a gradual realization that the community **no longer exists** as an effective source of support and that **an important part of the self has disappeared** [emphasis in original].[24]

The presence of trauma in Narratives of Recovery exists on multiple levels–on parallel temporal levels of past and present, as I have already discussed–but also on superimposed personal and cultural levels. This project seeks to establish the presence of cultural trauma, as it manifests itself in the life of the individuals who come to life in the literature, films, and plays of many contemporary African American artists.

To talk about the cultural level of trauma at work in Narratives of Recovery is to point towards the potential benefits of such representations of lingering injury. The narratives may serve as a tool to predict the climactic changes and progressions of

[24] Erik Erikson, quoted in Jeffrey Alexander, 10.

African Americans' and white Americans' attempts to constructively process the past. The process of representing cultural trauma contributes not only to the process of healing, but also to define, perpetuate, indeed to keep alive, the ghosts of the past.

Because "how an event is remembered is intimately entwined with how it is represented," Narratives of Recovery not only comment on the past, but they also influence–through their representation of slavery–how the traumatic past is dealt with in the present, and how it will be handled or coped with in the future. The recollection of the horrors of slavery "is mediated through narratives that are modified with the passage of time, filtered through cultural artifacts and other materializations, which represent the past in the present. " Each succeeding generation of African Americans "reinterprets and represents the collective memory around [slavery] according to its needs and means," [25] therefore providing us with a map of social, political, and racial expectations, with unfulfilled desires, and with unhealed scars. The pulse of contemporary African American culture–or at least one of its pulses–resonates through Narratives of Recovery.

This project intends to be an investigation of contemporary artistic representations of slavery as they arise from a particular cultural, historical, and social setting. It interacts with literary, dramatic, and cinematographic texts, through the lens of a psychoanalytic framework, for the purpose of illuminating African Americans', and white Americans' relationship(s) to the legacy of slavery. It does not endeavor to mend or hone the applications of psychoanalytical models for the reading of cultural texts–my expertise lies in the fields of literature and culture, not in those of psychology or psychoanalysis. Rather, I hope to enrich the meaning of these narratives by juxtaposing

[25] Ron Eyerman, 12,14, 15.

their reading against a compatible, perhaps even catalytic, analytical tool, one that makes salient the injuries scarring the American past and present.

CHAPTER 2
THE MASTER'S TOOLS: AFRICAN AMERICAN WRITING AND AMERICAN LITERARY REALISM

"It is all such truth–truth to the life;
Everywhere your pen falls it leaves a photograph."
Mark Twain in a letter to William Dean Howells

When this project was still in the conceptual stage, the premise on which it rested seemed simple enough: in the last twenty years or so, a shift has taken place in the African American literary traditions characterized by a movement away from realism, toward supernaturalism. The methodology of my study was to be as follows: first, I planned to demonstrate and describe what I have identified as a shift in contemporary African American fiction, and then proceed to explain the social, literary, cultural, and historical factors that may have prompted it. The first step, then, would be to situate African American writing within the American realist tradition for the purpose of tracing its trajectory away from the realist aesthetic. Unexpectedly, this endeavor proves to be a complex one.

African American writers' relationship to literary realism has been, and remains, quite complex. Literary realism borrows from the pragmatism and empiricism of science; it is based on reason, objectivity, and observation. It parades, at least in its unmediated forms, as a transparent representation of reality, a representation believed to behave not unlike, in the words of Mark Twain quoted in the epigraph above, a photographic representation. Contemporary scholars have now moved beyond the illusion of "truthful" representation. We understand that the arbitrary nature of language, and the

ideological nature of perception and interpretation, prevent us from experiencing and communicating an objective and accurate version of the "real," a point to which I will return. But ours is a culture which "equates the 'real' with the 'visible.'"[1] The current infusion of "reality TV" shows that saturate our popular culture (they have now become more than TV shows, they literally represent cultural phenomena), as well as the popularity of such alternative channels as TLC (The Learning Channel), the Discovery and Life channels, testify to our fondness for "realness," even if it comes in staged forms like *Survivor* or *Big Brother*. For this reason, despite our awareness of the impossibility of representing "reality," we remain nonetheless drawn to realistic aesthetics.[2]

Recent poststructuralist theories have brought into relief the relationship between realism (visual, literary, or otherwise) and power by exposing the ontological and epistemological foundations of realism as working hand in hand with political and racial domination. As Gerald Graff explains: "the distinction between ourselves and what we perceive turns 'other' into an alien thing ripe for domination and manipulation."[3] The power structures embedded in the realist genre(s) represent one of the factors contributing to the problematic relationship between black literature and realism.

Realism(s) in Black and White

In the light of recent, and less recent, scholarship, it is difficult to arrive at a conclusive definition of realism and to identify the texts that belong to its canon. Some scholars claim that the label of realism defines a group of texts too dissimilar to be

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[1] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, 45.

[2] Bernard Bell claims that most of the one hundred novels published by African American authors between 1962 and 1983 continue to subscribe to the synthesis of traditional realism and romance that characterize the form of the Afro-American novel at its beginning in 1853 (277).

[3] Quoted in Madelyn Jablon, *Black Metafiction*, 19.

grouped together, while others insist that realism would be more accurately identified as a reading, rather than as a writing, practice.[4] What seems to be agreed upon is the fact that realism, as a literary phenomenon, culminated in the years between the Civil War and World War 1, and that it consisted–formally, aesthetically, and politically–of representations that aimed to be objective, accurate, devoid of the excesses of romanticism and sentimentalism and, above all, believable. As Leo Bersani points out, "Huck Finn is socially dangerous to the extent that we do find him believable or 'real'" (59). The emphasis of realist texts was to be on politics rather than on aesthetics, or on thematic rather than formal concerns, performing the task of initiating, at best, social change and, at worst, at least some level of social introspection.

Despite the variety of opinions and concerns at work in the range of published studies about American realism, it is troubling to notice the relative lack of attention given to black realist authors. Indeed, there are studies that deal specifically with black literature of the period between the two wars, such as Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* and Dickson Bruce's *Black American Writing from the Nadir*; and others that undertake an analysis of racial issues or of racial literary cross-fertilization within the realist movement or the period during which it peaked, such as Eric Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations* and Kenneth Warren's *Black and White Strangers.* While these studies are valuable, my concern lies with the inclusion–or non-inclusion I should say–of Afro-American authors in more general or canonical studies (read white) of American realism. Very seldom does such scholarship devote adequate attention to African American

[4] Michael Davitt Bell, *The Problem of American Realism* and Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism.*

authors. When they are included, black authors are rarely the subject of more than a single chapter.[5]

The compartmentalization of black and white realist authors, which relegates them to separate scholarly categories, can be attributed to the two following hypotheses. First, there is still a persistent need in literary studies to protect the white canon from "contamination." Also, the multilayered nature of black realism makes it somewhat difficult to label under the same category as (white) realism–a theme that this paper explores. [6]

Despite "the efforts of recent literary histories, restructured curricula and anthologies," there is still, writes Toni Morrison, a "separate confinement" that protects American Literature from other categories such as Chicano Literature, Afro-American Literature, Native Literature, etc. (1). To concurrently discuss black and white authors in scholarship that investigates a genre established and maintained predominantly by white male writers causes a risk of "miscegenational contamination." Additionally, black realism threatens the American canon not only because of its color, but also because it does not entirely subscribe to the same identifying conventions as the realist work of

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[5] Such studies as Kaplan's *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Quirk and Scharnhorst's *American Realism and the Canon*, Sundquist's *American Realism*, Nancy Glazener's *Reading for Realism*, to name but a few, make no reference to African American realist authors; *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism* contains a short article on Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folks* and Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Michael Davitt Bell's *The Problem of American Realism* and Richard Brodhead's *Cultures of Letters* devote one chapter apiece to black authors. Barbara Foley's *Telling the Truth* is a valuable exception to the apparent compartmentalization of black and white realist narratives.

[6] The multifaceted nature of black realism–due to the complexity of its relationship with the white literary institution and to its immersion in a racist social climate–is highlighted in the table of contents in Bernard Bell's landmark study *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition*. The titles under which Bell categorizes the African American texts discussed in his study reflect the complexity of the black realist genre: Social Realism, Poetic Realism, Genteel Realism, Folk Realism, Satiric Realism, Neorealism, Critical Realism, etc.

more canonical white writers. Realism as a genre already stands on shaky ground. Many contemporary literary historians struggle to establish a set of criteria and conventions that would stabilize its status as a genre rather than as a conglomeration of texts simply regrouped on the basis of having been produced during the same historical period. If included in the white realist canon, the hybridity of black realism would only compound the difficulties of delineating the conventions of the genre.

I am not making a case for rallying the works of black realist writers under the banner of the white realist canon; this would simply be an exercise in "circumscribing and limiting the [black] literature to a mere reaction to or denial of the Queen, judging the work solely in terms of its referents to Eurocentric criteria," and consequently in denying its complexity.[7] Toni Morrison is right in pointing out the hegemonizing consequences of canon formation. Cornel West quite eloquently warns of other consequences of canonization, such as the flattening of significant idiosyncrasies that could otherwise reveal political, cultural, and aesthetic issues:

> Toomer's ingenious modernist formal innovations and his chilling encounter with black southern culture in *Cane* are masked by associating him with the assertions of pride by the "new Negro" in the twenties. Ellison's existentialist blues novelistic practices, with their deep sources in Afro-American music, folklore, Western literary humanism, and American pluralist ideology, are concealed by subsuming him under a "post-Wright school of black writing." Baldwin's masterful and memorable essays that mix Jamesian prose with black sermonic rhythms are similarly treated . . . Last, Ishmael Reed's bizarre and brilliant postmodernist stories fall well outside black literary lineages and genealogies. (199)

For West, the process of canon formation –black, white, or otherwise–can potentially "domesticate and dilute the literary power and historical significance" of important black works (199).

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[7] Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," 10.

While we should avoid homogenizing works for the purpose of regrouping them into useful categories, at the same time I do not want to minimize the similarities that exist between black and white realisms. Ultimately, both complex traditions help define and depend on each other. Many African American authors did appropriate and use dominant literary genres, including realism, particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This phenomenon is partly due to what Henry Louis Gates calls "the long racist tradition in Western letters, of demanding that black people *prove* their full humanity" ("Canon Formation" 17). The desire to show the white world that they could indeed read and write, or at least learn to, was a crucial investment for many free and enslaved Africans. Literacy–standing as the visible sign of reason–is the benchmark against which the very concept of civilization was understood. Therefore, only after displaying an ability to master literacy could Africans prove, in terms that whites would find *measurable*, a black humanity capable of securing their freedom.

In "Writing 'Race' and the Difference it Makes," Gates recounts an anecdote involving Alexander Crummell, a black intellectual and philosopher, founder of the American Negro Academy in 1897, and the white politician John C. Calhoon. While an errand boy in the Antislavery Office in New York city, Crummell recalls overhearing Calhoon stating "[t]hat if he could find a Negro who knew the Greek syntax, he could then believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man" (16). Crummell took on the challenge and sailed for England where he attended Cambridge University and learned the Greek syntax. Although, as the story goes, Calhoon was not overly impressed, "Crummell never stopped believing that mastering the master's tongue was the *sole* path to civilization and to intellectual freedom and social equality for the

black person" (17). Crummell was convinced that the African should claim Western culture as his/her rightful heritage, and only then could he/she proceed to belong in the New World.

Many African Americans believed, as did Crummell, in the superiority of white culture and language; even those who did not share this belief understood that without acquiring fluency in both the goal of freedom and equality would be even more difficult to achieve. The apparent adoption of, or subscription to, dominant white literary forms and conventions–often (mis)understood as assimilationist–was a necessary political move. Indeed, claims Bruce, black literature during the post-bellum and post-reconstruction period *was* assimilationist inasmuch as it adhered mostly to white standards, which does not mean, Bruce specifies, that "its proponents had made peace with white American racism and discrimination" (14).

While these Afro-American writers strategically chose to adopt the white dominant genres, they also soon realized the limitation of white literary aesthetics. The negotiations between the benefits and limitations of realism, for example, led many black writers to manipulate the conventions of the genre by combining selected features of various genres, creating a multilayered version of realism. The following investigation will examine, starting with the antebellum slave narrative, the ways in which many black authors have manipulated the white realist aesthetic so as to overcome some of its limitations, creating in the process a brand of realism which operates *in excess* of white literary realism or, in other words, which cannot be contained by its conventions and codes. I will also speculate on the reasons why many black authors have been committed

to the realist genre and point out some of the social, cultural, and political inadequacies of such an aesthetic for African American writers.

According to William Andrews, "the slave narrative took on its classic form and tone between 1840 and 1860 when the romantic movement in American literature was in its most influential phase" (63). But the form of the antebellum slave narrative does not limit itself to the conventions of the romantic genre. Bernard Bell describes Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig,* the first novel written by an African American woman, as a synthesis of the sentimental genre and the slave narrative conventions, of fact and fiction, of romance and autobiography (Bell 45-7). Charles Johnson defines the slave narrative as related to the Puritan narrative and to Saint Augustine's *Confessions,* and as borrowing elements from the picaresque, sentimental, and travel narrative genres.[8]

Despite its influence by multiple genres, the slave narrative already subscribed to realist conventions, perhaps most predominantly in its commitment to facticity, or to what Barbara Foley refers to as "documentary overdetermination." This need for Afro-American writers to ground their narratives in verifiable facts is based on the principle that "racism denies full subjectivity to the black protagonist and full authority to the black author; so any text affirming such a subjectivity or such an authority necessarily requires the reader to engage in a (willing or unwilling) abolition of disbelief" (*Truth* 235). The abolition of disbelief was executed by white authors and public figures who, in prefaces and introductions, authenticated the narratives written by black authors.[9]

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[8] *Oxherding Tale,* 118-9.

[9] The practice of authentication does not limit itself to the antebellum slave narratives but extends to other genres as well as to later periods. For a discussion of authenticating practices in African American literature, see Barbara Foley's *Telling the Truth,* 246-55.

The slave narrative also shares with realist texts a political commitment to the representation of social ills. In the hands of the abolitionist movement, the slave narrative became the anti-slavery tool par excellence. African American authors were writing for white audiences "bemused, skeptical, and hostile"; the authentication appended to the narratives assured readers of their veracity while simultaneously enhancing their political effectiveness.[10]

At this early stage in the black literary tradition, African American writers' relationship with realism is already problematic. For example, Valerie Smith points out that, paradoxically, it is through the *fictionalization* of one's life that the (ex)slave "bestows a quality of authenticity to it." Smith shows that "the process of plot construction, characterization and designation of beginnings and endings–in short the process of authorship–provides the narrators with a measure of authority unknown to them in either real or fictional life" (2).

The example of Solomon Northrop is equally paradoxical. Northrop authenticates his own narrative by claiming that his story provides "another key to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*." He succeeds in endowing his narrative with authority by riding on "Miss Stowe's coattails and shar[ing] in her immense notoriety." The instance of "authenticating personal history by binding it to historical fiction" is an example of the strategic manipulation, by black authors, of genres and discourses, i.e.

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[10] Barbara Foley, "History, Fiction, and the Ground Between," 391-2.

fictional/historical/realist/romantic. Here, the authentication becomes as much a tool for insuring a wide readership as one for "verification."[11]

Through the publication of slave narratives, (ex)slaves attempted to legitimize their experiences. Yet these attempts were mediated by the fact that the narratives "were also (if not primarily) literary productions that documented the antislavery crusade." Their double status as popular art (regulated by the white publishing industry) and propaganda (regulated by the white abolitionists) imposed upon them an adherence to certain conventions and limited their artistic, as well as thematic and political, scope. Morrison comments on the fact that "[w]hatever the level of eloquence or the form, popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience." The experiences related by the slave narrators had to be shaped in such a way as to make them "palatable" to their white audience.[12] Hence, the (ex)slave narrators faced the challenges of protesting against the realities of slavery by maneuvering through a discursive terrain that *preexisted*, as Dwight McBride aptly argues, the slave's telling of his or her personal experiences. "As is the case with any producers of any narrative, slave witnesses had to understand clearly the terms of the discursive terrain to which they addressed themselves. Once they did, they had to determine how best to mold, bend, and shape their narrative testimony within those terms to achieve their political aims."[13]

While McBride is right to point out the fact that slave narratives operated within a context already put in place by white abolitionist discourse, we must consider the fact

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[11] The example of Solomon Northrop's authenticating practice is related in Stepto's *Behind the Veil,* 12.

[12] Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 90-1.

[13] Dwight McBride, *Truth and Testimony,* 6-7.

that the forces that were shaping the slave narratives were not unidirectional. If the testimonial process though which whites authenticated black narratives served as a certificate of authenticity for the experiences documented by these narratives, the reverse was also true: "the slave narrative also bears witness to the accuracy of the reports and testimony of white abolitionists." There is no doubt that the literary terrain of 19th century America modeled the genre of the slave narrative; yet I would argue that, in turn, the slave narrative helped push the dominant literary genre of romanticism toward the realist aesthetic that was to dominate the literary landscape during the next decades.

In postbellum slave narratives, the romantic element of the antebellum narratives–the heroic slave's flight to freedom–takes on a more pragmatic turn. The moral and social message of these narratives was no longer the abolition of slavery, nor did the liberated slaves recount a courageous flight from bondage. Rather, the slaves freed by the war intended to prove to their white audience that a life of servitude had prepared them well "to seize opportunity in freedom and turn it to honorable account, both socially and economically," having acquired valuable moral values, such as reliability, temperance, diligence, and faithful service. The postbellum slave narrator no longer asks the reader to evaluate his/her right to be free on ethical and religious grounds, but "simply and dispassionately on the basis of what Booker T. Washington liked to call 'facts.'" [14]

This notion of one's ability to relate the facts of one's life dispassionately is, once again, paradoxical for the Afro-American writers of the period. The slaves and ex-slaves, thought by whites to be satisfied with the conditions of slavery, had to demonstrate to their white oppressors their *desire* to be free and to be considered equal. And desire ultimately implies emotion. Yet the African American writers, especially those writing

[14] William L. Andrews, "The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Realism," 68.

using the realist aesthetic, had to promote an attitude devoid of passion, based on objective and intellectual observations. James Howard understood this requirement. In the preface of *Bond and Free*, the first black novel to be published after the Civil War, Howard informs his readers that his antiplantation novel is an accurate representation of reality, assuring them that he has "endeavored to suppress all rancorous feeling" that could get in the way of an objective treatment of his subject matter.[15]

This kind of racist call for objectivity is most blatantly displayed in the reaction to William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner.* The supporters and admirers of Styron's fictional slave narrative praised the novel for its objectivity and authenticity. "Only a white Southern writer could have brought it off" claims one critic, suggesting that "a black writer suffering from a complex personal, social and political anxiety 'would have probably stacked the cards, producing, in a mood of unnerving rage and indignation, a melodrama of saints and sinners.'"[16]

Booker T. Washington's narrative *Up From Slavery*, as well as his political philosophy, were influential in helping realism secure a solid grounding in the postreconstruction African American literary tradition. Washington advocated a culture of "action," rather than one of "words"; he claimed to have "always had more of an ambition to do things than merely to talk *about* doing them" (quoted in Andrews, 71). Washington warned against the "artificial" nature of such forms of writing as poetry, drama, and fiction, which only imitated the "real thing." Washington would read only biographies, for he liked to be sure that he was reading "about a real man or a real thing" (quoted in Andrews, 72). By praising the biographical genre as the only kind of "real"

[15] Quoted in Bernard Bell's *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition*, 56.

[16] Quoted in Ashraf Rushdy's *Neo-Slave Narratives*, 56.

writing, Washington advocates a form of writing free from artifice: one based on pragmatism rather than aesthetic display.[17]

Despite his distrust for most kinds of writings, literacy was nonetheless an important issue for Washington. He was a strong proponent of the teaching of English, as long as it was taught "in the form in which a future bricklayer might require it."[18] Washington believed that higher education, unlike the industrial education he promoted, seduced blacks away from their communities and from their duties as educators of the black masses. Classically educated African Americans, in turn, aspired to join the ranks of the middle class and bourgeoisie, leading them away from the black communities.

W.E.B. Du Bois, Washington's political and intellectual opponent, promoted the supplanting of the industrial curriculum by a more classical one. Du Bois believed that a different, lower standard of education for blacks only resulted in a subordinate social position. Conversely, high literary achievement was a way to transcend the obstacles of a racist and segregated society. "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas," writes Du Bois.[19]

Despite their diverging opinions on matters of literary education, each leader's position contributed to solidifying the link between realism and truth, between factuality and trustworthiness. Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folks*, states that "the way to truth and right lies in straightforward honesty, not in indiscriminate flattery." Such discourses initiated an opposition between aesthetics–or artifice, flattery, deception–and politics–or

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[17] Washington quoted in Andrews' "The Representation of Slavery," 71-2.

[18] Quoted in Richard Brodhead's *Cultures of Letters,* 188.

[19] ibid

realism, truthfulness, action–a debate that would affect the production of subsequent generations of literary texts by African American writers.

A similar debate about the aesthetics/ politics dichotomy was taking place in the white literary community. In his study of gender and American realism, Michael Davitt Bell argues that the attempt by white male realist writers to construct realism as a "real," "scientific," and "political" genre was prompted by a desire to masculinize the social role and image of the artist, or in the words of Bell, a desire to "present the writer as anything *but* an artist" (33).

According to Bell, William Dean Howells, for example, associated realism with "democracy in literature," and this belief positioned the writer of democratic fiction against "the conventional notion of the irrelevance of literary activity." The democracy principle gave the writer a sense of "'real' social significance" but, most importantly, it associated the writer "with what was most normal or ordinary in his audience," and consequently dissociated him "from the socially marginal and sexually ambiguous implications of the 'literary' and 'artistic.'"[20] The realist novel, hence, claimed political status by sacrificing aesthetic concerns.

The realist school's concern with "masculinizing"–or "defeminizing"–the endeavors of literary activities constituted additional obstacles for the women writers of the period, and even more so for black women writers. Clearly, because the realist aesthetic sought to escape from what it considered to be the excesses of romanticism and sentimentalism–genres predominantly associated with women authors–the gatekeepers, primarily white and male, of the realist literary institution patronizingly dismissed as

[20] Michael Davitt Bell, *The Problem of American Realism,* 32-3.

trivial much of the work written by women. [21] Most black women writers, then, faced the dual obstacles of gender and race when attempting to infiltrate the white publishing industry.

It is perhaps because of this double impediment that writers such as Prince, Jacobs, Harper, and Hopkins, for example, became so adept at incorporating "a miscellany of forms"[22] in their literary production or, in the words of Frances E.W. Harper, to "weave [the experiences of the Negro] into the literature of the country."[23] Black women writers of the period, in addition to challenging racist and sexual ideologies, were as committed as were their black male counterparts to using literature as a weapon to promote social change and racial liberation. This political agenda was more compatible with the abolitionists' and later the realists' concerns than with the sentimentalist genre generally characterized as dealing with the trifling matters of the domestic sphere. Black women writers were able to reconcile these contradictory impulses between the domestic and the political by incorporating within their writing various conventions belonging to different literary genres. Hazel Carby describes this strategic multilayering of genres as a sort of "cultural blending":

> like [Nancy] Prince, [Harriet] Wilson gained her narrative authority from adapting literary conventions to more adequately conform to a narrative representation and re-creation of black experience. It is important to identify the source of many of these conventions in the sentimental novel and also to recognize that Wilson's particular use of the sentimental conventions derives from the sentimental novel via slave narratives to produce a unique allegorical form. That *Our Nig* did not conform to the parameters of contemporary domestic fiction can be attributed to this cultural blend. (45)

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[21] There are exceptions to the dismissal of the work by white women writers. For example, the writings of Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Alice Brown had their place in the period's literary landscape. Karen L. Kilcup, ed. *Soft Canons: American Women Writers and Masculine Tradition*, 4.

[22] Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 72.

[23] Harper, *Iola Leroy*, 262.

Black women writers' call to political and social action aimed to reach multiple audiences: white, black, male, and female. Their multidimensional use of various literary conventions allowed them to reach these audiences, perhaps even more effectively than the black male writers of the period who could/would not utilize the sentimentalist genre as a way to connect with a growing, and increasingly politicized, female readership. These women writers learned, following the lead of such pioneers as Harriet Jacobs, to convey political messages to their audiences by writing from within the boundaries of the very genres which appeared to restrict, rather than foster, such an endeavor.[24]

While many Afro-American writers were strongly influenced by their predecessors and contemporary political leaders, many were also influenced by the white writers who dominated the publishing and literary scene. I want to use the term "influence" here cautiously. The notion of influence distorts the power relation at work in the relationship between black authors and the white literary institutions of the period.[25] While there are indeed instances of genuine respect and admiration of white authors by blacks (Ellison for Twain, for example), those black authors who adopted white literary genres did so primarily to get their work published. The appropriation of white literary genres and style enabled black writers to strategically embed their political message in a language and form that the white public would recognize and understand. These writers understood the power their literature could exert, but only if it successfully reached a wide and general audience.

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[24] For a compelling example of the ways in which black women writers ingeniously worked within the conventions of the genres available to them, see Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood*. For example, Carby argues that Jacobs "developed an alternative set of definitions of womanhood and motherhood in the text which remained in tension with the cult of true womanhood" and demonstrates how Jacobs successfully "utilized the conventions of an antebellum ideal of womanhood while exposing them as contradictory" (56, 53).

[25] Tracy Mishkin, "Theorizing Literary Influence and African American Writers," 4.

Paul Laurence Dunbar succeeded in reaching this wide audience, as he became, in the late 1890s, "the most *popular* poet–black or white–in the United States" (Bruce 58). William Dean Howells' endorsement of his work ensured his success. Dunbar was not the first black writer to use dialect in his writing, yet he was the first to do so and be published by a major American publishing house.[26] The use of dialect in poetry and fiction was associated mostly with the plantation tradition developed by white writers (among them Thomas Nelson Page and Irwin Russell), a tradition that dangerously reinforced racist stereotypes. But Dunbar's appropriation of the plantation tradition was not without a political agenda; his work attempted to revise the tradition by infusing the plantation characters with humanity and depth. Despite his efforts, he was often accused of creating "minstrel" characters. These charges troubled him, as he writes in a letter to Frederick Douglass' widow: "I am sorry to find among intelligent people those who are unable to differentiate dialect as a philological branch from the burlesque of Negro minstrelsy."[27]

The inability for contemporary readers of Dunbar's work to differentiate between *real* and *caricatured* black characters was in part due to the realist aesthetic through which these characters were displayed. The plantation tradition and other modes of representation of the minstrel black character already claimed to offer a genuine portrait of black life. To go against the grain of such ideologically charged representations using the same aesthetic demanded sophisticated manipulations–which many black writers were indeed performing. But the minstrel character so thoroughly fed the racist fantasies

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[26] Charles Chesnutt was also publishing stories in dialect at that time, but his racial identity was not yet widely known.

[27] Quoted in Bruce, *Black American Writing from the Nadir*, 60.

of white Americans that the subtle manipulation of the genre performed by writers such as Dunbar required time before being able to displace the image of the plantation *coon* or *dandy* from the white imagination. Nonetheless, dialect literature was especially suited for what Bruce describes as "a strategy of couching protest in a language that white readers would find comfortable" (116). Charles Chesnutt would also utilize this strategy.

As he did for Dunbar, Howells also promoted Chesnutt's literary career. He characterized Chesnutt's work as belonging to "the good school, the only school" of writing.[28] Chesnutt was indeed committed to a realist representation of black life; he writes in his journal,

> I intend to record my impressions of men and things, and such incidents or conversations which take place within my knowledge, with a view to future use in literary work. I shall not record stale negro minstrel jokes, or worn out newspaper squibs on the "man and brother." I shall leave the realm of fiction, where most of this stuff is manufactured, and come down to hard facts.[29]

Chesnutt's intention to write about Southern life was in part influenced by the success of white novels on the subject, especially Albion Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand.* In the aftermath of Tourgée's success, Chesnutt sees, as did Dunbar before him, "the literary matter of Southern black life as speaking to a certain *interest*, the interest of the 'Northern mind' in Southern blacks' historical situation."[30]

Tourgée's influence on Chesnutt is undeniable, yet Chesnutt's dialect tales also draw on the Southern regional plantation tales of Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page. The plantation genre generally consists of a white author "documenting" Southern life by collecting tales from ex-slaves. The tales gained credibility and

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[28] Quoted in Andrews, "William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt: Criticism and Race Fiction in the Age of Booker T. Washington," 329.

[29] Quoted in Caccavari's "A Trick of Mediation," 131.

[30] Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters*, 193.

authenticity by promoting the illusion that the white Northerner was only transcribing the folktales he had collected, which are presumably told in the ex-slaves' own voices; hence the use of dialect. Through agile manipulation of the form, however, "without in any sense exploding the artifice of this kind of tale, Chesnutt lightly underlines the fact of its artificiality" (Brodhead 196). Caccavari comments on the subversive potential of Chesnutt's tales:

> Chesnutt's reworking not only of racist plantation literature but of sympathetic Northern liberals such as Tourgée is his version of transculturation, appropriating white literary forms and creating a melange with African-American folklore to produce a viable composite guide to living in the volatile contact zone of the late nineteenth-century United- States. (143)

Chesnutt, then, in *The Conjure Woman,* was "signifyin(g)" on both Harris' Uncle Remus and white liberals such as Albion Tourgée. But these political subtleties may well have been lost on his white audience, which unfortunately might "only see what it wants to see, what it has been conditioned to see" (Caccavari 140).

These tales fall within the scope of the "local color" or regionalist genre, a genre defined by Brodhead as a literature promoting the idea that someone else's way of life is more "'colorful' than one's own (culturally superior) way, in other words, that a primary vitality absent from the refined is present in the backward" (205-6). This playful exoticism–playful because it provided "leisured recreation" to the cultivated, bourgeois class–was going to significantly escalate during the Harlem Renaissance. And while this genre made room for the representation of realities different from the dominant middle-class version of life favored by white realist authors, it still subjected black literary texts to crushing power relations. Brodhead clearly describes this phenomenon:

> the structure of social and literary interests that established regionalism as a genre for the elite both made a place for [Chesnutt] as a writer in elite culture and constrained his work to serve the imaginative agenda of that culture, the agenda not

> of dismantling prejudice but of feeding an appetite for consumable otherness . . . After the publication of the first conjure tales, Chesnutt found out much more directly how much the literary-cultural situation that made a place for him in letters bounded the scope of that place. (206)

Once again, the black writer, compelled to write in the popular genre for the purpose of getting published and of speaking the language of his or her white audience, finds him/herself in a problematic position toward the dominant aesthetic.

William Andrews reads Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* and James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as attempts to destabilize the notion that a realistic literary aesthetic is the only valuable mode of representing what Booker T. Washington called "a real man or real thing." Such "wordsmiths," Andrews writes, "needed to decertify–literally, to make *un*certain–the 'real, solid foundation' on which Tuskegee realism claimed its hegemony" ("Representation of Slavery" 74). Both these narratives contained the potential to highlight the ideological nature of texts claiming to mirror reality. But the manipulation of realistic conventions displayed in these texts was not immediately understood. The solid hold of realism on late nineteenth and early twentieth-century ideology prevented some of the period's greatest African American thinkers from seeing the potential of such literary achievements to expose the constructed nature of realism. Alain Locke, in an article published in *Opportunity* in January 1934, writes:

> to the extent that Weldon Johnson's autobiography represents a new and effective step in Negro Biography, it can be attributed to the sober realistic restraint that dominates it in striking contrast to the flamboyant egotism of sentimentality of much of our previous biographical writing. So we must look to enlightened realism as the present hope of Negro Art and literature, not merely because it is desirable for our art to be in step with the prevailing mode and trend of the arts and literature of its time–important though that may be–but because both practical and aesthetic interests dictate truth as the basic desideratum in the portrayal of the Negro,–and truth is the saving grace of realism. (222)

The sober, redeeming genre favored by Locke offers redemption and resurrection from what he considers the sins of sentimentalist fiction.

The commitment to a realistic aesthetic as the most viable political tool for the black writer would seep into later periods. In *Telling the Truth*, Foley argues that the impulse to immerse their narratives in verifiable facts continues to concern African American authors who enter the domain of modernism and postmodernism. " Even as it participates in the relativism and skepticism characterizing many twentieth century metahistorical novels and fictional biographies, the [Afro-American] text doggedly insists upon its status as a purveyor of historical specific cognition" (256). The Harlem Renaissance provides an interesting example of literary texts that, despite their "experimental" nature, remained grounded in a concern for veracity. Zora Neale Huston's fictional/anthropological accounts of life in Eatonville, Florida, were promoted as representing an authentic slice of Southern black folklore, as were some novels by Claude McKay, promoted as providing a genuine portrayal of black Jamaican life.

Furthermore, many Harlem Renaissance writers were subjected, as their nineteenth century predecessors were, to an authenticating process. While white patronage of black artists during the Renaissance created opportunities for black writers, there was nonetheless a price to pay: "the price tag was often displayed quite openly in the form of the patron's introduction, which typically validated the author in terms that were at best condescending and stereotypical" (North 103). The white patrons and publishers assured the readers that the narratives they were about to read represented authentic Negro Folklore and that, indeed, their authors were genuine Negroes. For example, in his preface to McKay's *Spring in New Hampshire*, I.A. Richards attests that "Claude McKay

is a pure-blooded Negro." Similarly, Walter Jekyll, in the preface to *Songs of Jamaica,* assures the reader that "they have here the thoughts and feelings of a Jamaican peasant of pure black blood" (North 103).[31]

The white literary establishment put much emphasis on the ethnic and racial identity of the black authors they endorsed, suggesting that such criteria enhanced the authenticity of the works. C.L.R. James exposes the deceptive nature of the concept of authenticity in as essay entitled "Discovering Literature in Trinidad: the 1930s,"

> it is in the history and philosophy and literature of Western Europe that I have gained my understanding not only of Western Europe's civilization, but of the importance of the underdeveloped countries . . . I didn't learn literature from the mango-tree, or bathing on the shore and getting the sun of colonial countries; I set out to master the literature and philosophy and ideas of Western civilization. That is where I have come from and I would not pretend to be anything else. And I am able to speak of the underdeveloped countries infinitely better than I would otherwise have been able to. (57)

James here is suggesting that his understanding of Caribbean culture is based on his knowledge of the colonizer's philosophical material rather than on an illusive black or Caribbean essence.

The obstacles faced by black authors during the antebellum, postbellum, postreconstruction, and Harlem Renaissance periods are quite similar. During each period, authors were subjected, to various degrees, to a process of authentication. Constantly, African American writers had to negotiate ways of being politically effective without offending their white readership or, in other words, to tell the truth without telling the whole truth–a point to which I will return shortly. Ultimately, their adherence to the realist aesthetic imposed on them the embracing of white patronage, and consequently resulted in a dangerous flirting with racist constructions of black identity.

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[31] For an extended treatment of these issues, see Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism,* specifically chapters 5 and 6.

Hence, the power of black literature as a political medium was undermined by the fact that black authors had to adopt the dominant genres, and with them the ideological baggage they carried.[32]

The Black Arts Movement initiated some changes in American racial and cultural politics. The realist aesthetic, because it implied white verification and authentication, put black writers in a subordinate position, at least until the Black Arts Movement. The black cultural productions of this period were aimed at a black, rather than a white audience. Assimilationist and integrationist attitudes were replaced by separatist ones. Black artists and citizens proudly displayed, rather than made excuses for, their African roots. Offending a white audience was no longer a concern; anger, confrontation, and overt resistance to racism was no longer camouflaged by clever signifying practices or made subversive by subtle manipulations of genres and conventions. Yet, among all these black nationalist transformations, one thing remains the same, the appropriation of the realist aesthetic is still present and problematic.

In fact, the Black Arts Movement is perhaps the period during which the investment in a realist aesthetic became the most vehement. The aethetics/politics divide aroused some important conflicts; the formal innovation that had characterized the modern and postmodern period was denounced as "white" and, being white, it was believed inadequate to promote the political agenda of the Black Nationalists. The Black Arts Movement insisted on the importance for the black writers to not be "distracted from

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[32] Robert E. Washington differentiates between what he describes as the earlier "paternalistic," and the later "co-optive," patterns of hegemony displayed by the white literary institutions toward African American writers. For example, he argues that the liberal-left intelligentsia's subjugation of black literary culture during the 20s was a "more tolerant, and inclusive co-optive hegemony" that was performed not in the spirit "of racism and repression but of cultural liberalization and inclusion" (*The Ideologies of African American Literature* 331).

the serious business of politics by the trivial interest in art." To do so was criticized as "undercutting the most important justification for the study of black literature: content that expressed the need for political reform." [33]

Like many of their black critical ancestors, the leaders of the Black Arts Movement, most vocal among them Larry Neal,

> identified realism as the only mode of fiction through which social commentary could be voiced. It rejected all others as incapable of conveying the message of protest; they were to be regarded as the products of a racist society, and black writers engaging them were to be condemned as conscripts in their own demise. A didactic literature propagandizing militant ideology described the role that art was to play in the war to end the discrimination against and oppression of black Americans. (Jablon 16-7)

Literary realism became during this period, in the words of Madelyn Jablon, the "Naturalized" Black Aesthetic.

The Failure of Realism

There are consequences to considering politics and aesthetics as mutually exclusive categories, or of divesting art of social and political concerns. The form/content, aesthetics/politics binarisms fail to appropriately consider "works that provide a critique of a society through the rejection of these conventions, works that question that ideology underlying realism through self-study–works wherein the political content is articulated by the innovative use of form" (Jablon 17). Indeed, as Jablon argues, this inability to acknowledge the political message possibly embedded in formal innovation has hurt important writers such as Ellison, who endured thorough criticism for not abiding by the social realist genre favored by the critics and best displayed in Richard Wright's fiction. Clarence Major, in a collection of critical essays entitled *The Dark and Feeling*, also denounces the rigid separation of politics from aesthetics, claiming that "the novel *not*

[33] Madelyn Jablon, *Black Metafiction,* 16, 18.

deliberately aimed at bringing about freedom for black people has liberated as many minds as has the propaganda tract" (25).

Although Ralph Ellison did not condemn realism as a literary genre, he nonetheless expressed his doubt in the ability of American Realism to serve the concerns of black Americans. "How is it," he asks, "that our naturalistic prose–one of the most vital bodies of twentieth-century fiction, perhaps the brightest instrument for recording sociological fact, physical action, the nuance of speech, yet achieved–becomes suddenly dull when confronting the Negro?" (26). American realism, Ellison believed, mirrored white racial theories in a way that surreptitiously helped maintain the status quo. It was quite clear to Ellison: "American reality as seen by whites excludes blacks or misrepresents them" (24-5).

Not only has American realism generally failed to adequately represent African American experiences, as Kenneth Warren argues in *Black and White Strangers,* it has actually "stunted" the black literary tradition(s). By adhering so rigidly to literary realism, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr., black writers have been contributing to the racist project of an art "that reports and directly reflects brute, irreducible, and ineffable 'black reality,' a reality that in fact was often merely the formulaic fiction spawned by social scientists whose work intended to reveal a black America dehumanized by slavery, segregation, and racial discrimination, in a one-to-one relationship of art to life" (quoted in Warren, 6).

Realist writers indeed "imagined [they] did away with conventions," and consequently believed in the ability of their art to simply reflect experience truthfully.[34] But what the realists considered an accurate representation of the "real" is problematic

[34] Cathy Boeckmann, *A Question of Character*, 10.

precisely because it camouflages its own process in the construction, organization, and control of the social world. Contemporary critics often address this notion of the "flawed" nature of realism, emphasizing "the slippage that occurs between the social perception of reality and its representation."[35] In his introduction to *Spectacles of Realism*, Christopher Prendergast clearly defines this issue: "literary realism, in short, was the cultural brother of ideology, or more accurately, was itself an ideological 'operator' performing the primary task of ideology, the function of naturalizing socially and historically produced systems of meaning" (2). The illusionary transparency, or the epistemology of realism, thus perpetuates racial oppression because it creates the illusion of a fixed, unalterable, consensual reality.

This concept of consensual reality–and by this I mean a version of reality that appears naturalized in such a way as to suggest that there is, ultimately, one reality for all–promoted by realism significantly constrains the ability of African American writers to use the aesthetic without reinforcing its racist ideological function. Many scholars of realism argue that the genre developed as a defensive strategy against the chaos of a world undergoing severe social changes.[36] The realist novel, writes Bersani, "makes aesthetic sense out of social anarchy" (60). In fact, Warren claims that the nineteenth century realistic narratives organized and constructed a chaotic and fragmented reality into a whole, coherent one, and that it provided this society with "a reassuring myth about itself" (2). The problem, theorizes Warren drawing on Bersani, is that a "reassuring belief in psychological unity and intelligibility" results in a society's "inability to tolerate,

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[35] Michael Anesko, "Recent Critical Approaches," 81.

[36] See for example Kaplan's *The Social Construction of American Realism,* Michael Davitt Bell's *The Problem of American Realism*, and Donald Pizer's *Twentieth Century American Literary Naturalism.*

an unwillingness to investigate, the alternative social possibilities that disorder might contain" (3).

If indeed, as Bernard Bell argues, one of the characteristics of black social realism was to make visible the "disparities between the practices and principles of democracy," the black realist narratives could easily disrupt the controlled, stable, "mythical" reality put in place by white realist novelists, shattering the notion of global reality solidly established by the white realist tradition. The black and white realist traditions could not do otherwise but to present to the American public a *different* version of reality. For, as Valerie Smith argues, "all literature bears the imprint of the writer's experience of society; black American writing, arising as it does from an experience alien to mainstream American culture, has tended by and large to articulate the writer's experience of de jure or de facto subordination" (6). Or, in other words, black realism has tended to articulate a version of reality *contradictory to* the white realist version of stable, consensual reality and experience. Implicit in this reality split is a threat of chaos, a threat that the white realist tradition attempted to neutralize. Both versions of American reality promoted by black and white realist authors were ultimately irreconcilable. As a result, African American writers constantly found themselves in a challenging position. As Charles Scruggs explains, "if the black writer fulfilled the expectations of the white audience, he outraged his black audience; if he satisfied the black audience, he bored the white audience."[37]

Ultimately, neither black nor white writers and readers wanted to, or did, represent reality. Both groups were promoting ideals that served their political agendas. The white reader, for example, "wanted the black character in literature to fit his conception of *the*

[37] Charles Scruggs, "All Dressed Up," 54.

Black Character in life: his nature was comic and his society was primitive."[38] As a result, many black writers were concerned with rectifying the negative stereotypical representations of African Americans branded in the American imagination by works of literature by whites. Thus, they were reluctant to "realistically" display black characters, preferring instead to answer the call of black readers who demanded "that they be depicted as black knights in shining armor" (Scruggs 555).

Sterling Brown called this reluctance a lack of "mental bravery" and urged that, despite the discomfort of blacks, "the truth should be our major concern." Du Bois supported Brown's rallying cry for "truthful" representation, pointing out that the urge to construct a more positive image of the black American was *also* resulting in a distorted image inasmuch as "we are denying we have or ever had a worst side." "We can afford the truth," Du Bois insisted.[39] But the negative responses to the dialect writing of such writers as Dunbar, Chesnutt, and later McKay, Toomer, and Hurston suggest otherwise. Clearly, the black American public was not ready for the truth.

Neither was the white public. After having been encouraged by Howells to write "something about the color line and as of actual and immediate interest as possible–that is of American life in the present rather [than] the past, even the recent past," Chesnutt wrote *The Marrow of Tradition.*[40] The novel, based on the Wilmington, North Carolina, white riots of 1898, came a little too close to reality to be comfortable to a white audience resentful of having to face the impact of their bigotry. Howells called the novel "bitter, bitter," a review that brought about, in the words of Nikki Giovanni, "the beginning of

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[38] ibid

[39] Quoted in Scruggs, 555-6.

[40] Andrews, "William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt," 331.

the end of white folks' love affair with Chesnutt."[41] "The plainer he made it, the more they hated him," Giovanni claims. She was right.

Fantastic Realities–Real Fantasies

"If men really could not distinguish between frogs and men, fairy-stories about frog-kings could not have arisen."
J.R.R. Tolkien

"Even the most extreme autonomous universes of fantasy are still referential; if they were not, the reader could not imagine their existence."
Linda Hutcheon

The recent shift in the black literary tradition(s) discussed in the present study is another manifestation of African American writers' complex relationship with realism. The narratives on which this project focuses take the form of historical novels thematically concerned with slavery and/or the Middle Passage. These texts are contemporary narratives of slavery; they display, as did many other black works before them, a mixing of genre. This time, the commitment to factuality of the Narratives of Recovery incorporates an infusion of the supernatural, creating what could paradoxically be described as fantastic realities, or real fantasies.

The mix of fact and fiction characterizing the Narratives of Recovery presents us with a fresh epistemology. The investigation of this epistemology requires a new approach, one that Kathryn Hume's comments may help formulate. In *Fantasy and Mimesis*, Hume contends that in order to be fully able to understand fantasy in literature we must unite, rather than separate into exclusive categories, fantasy and mimesis:

> we must abandon the assumption that mimesis, the *vraisemblance* to the world we know, is the only *real* part of literature; give up the notion that fantasy is peripheral and readily separable. We must start instead from the assumption that literature is

[41] William Dean Howells, "A Psychological Counter-Current in Recent Fiction," 882; Nikki Giovanni, *Gemini,* 104.

> the product of both mimesis and fantasy and talk about mimetic and fantastic elements in one work. (21)

To treat fantasy as a departure from realism and reality implies that mimetic presentation is the natural relationship between literature and the real world.

There exists, between realism–or the natural–and the supernatural, a kind of symbiotic relationship, inasmuch as each element of the seeming opposition is dialectically dependant on the other for its existence; only in the light of the natural can the supernatural be defined, and vice versa. Hence the natural and supernatural are much more connected than disconnected. In the words of Elizabeth Anne Leonard, "while the fantastic would not at first seem to be part of and could even be considered an escape from either the real world or history and tradition, such is not the case. What we do for pleasure is very much a part of our existence and our means of escape reveal much about what we escape from" (3). The supernatural, rather than transporting us away from reality, in fact "traces the limits of [reality's] epistemological and ontological frames."[42]

The supernatural, then, problematizes much more than it destroys the concept of reality. Theoretically, the supernatural *cannot* be imagined; this impossibility is best explained by Robert Scholes, who points out that "if we must acknowledge that reality inevitably excludes our human language, we must admit as well that these languages can never conduct the human imagination to a point beyond this reality."[43] Thus, what we imagine as being unreal is, in fact, a critique of what we imagine as real.

The relegation of realism and the supernatural (or fantasy) to exclusive categories is symptomatic of a greater ethnocentric impulse. In concluding that fantasy, or the

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[42] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion,* 23.

[43] Robert Scholes, *Structural Fabulation*, 7.

supernatural, distorts reality we imply the existence of only one acceptable, coherent–once again consensual–version of reality. This conclusion reflects the same process whereby we push to the periphery that which is not compatible to our own *perception* of the real.

Steven Feierman most cogently displays the process by which we make invisible what we interpret as un-real, especially in the realm of sciences where facts that cannot be empirically verified are simply discarded. Feierman argues that certain domains of African cultural and social histories (his study deals specifically with the history of Nyabingi public healers and mediums) have been rendered invisible–and here I simplify his argument–because they often prove too difficult to interpret. The following extensive quote describes well the notion of invisibility that I wish to highlight in my own argument:

> a more profound obstacle to historical representation is the conflict between the understanding of reality in Euro-American histories–especially academic ones–and the narratives of Nyabingi mediumship. While in the corpus of academic knowledge each historical character has a fixed life span and a final death, in the corpus of Nyabingi stories these conventions do not hold. Nor does the convention that each person must have only a single place of birth. The most important of the mediums are described in oral narratives as having lived at every time and (perhaps) at no time. Historians read (or hear) these narratives and conclude that the stories do not describe "reality." The absence of a naturalistic narrative is then taken to mark the absence of an entire domain of social life. Since the narratives are judged by historians to be inadequate, the public healer's domain becomes invisible. (190)

Histories that are uninterpretable in the language of Western sciences are discarded as fictional. Feierman suggests that it is important to study what we make invisible, as it may reveal much about our own biased and flawed scientific methodologies.

In *Flights from Realism*, Marguerite Alexander argues that the experiences and ways of living that were once marginalized as socially and morally undesirable in the

classical realist novel are now enjoying a central position (16). While she is right to point out that the realist genre is thematically expanding, many marginalized narratives find a voice through alternate forms of fiction, such as through the fantastic, the gothic, the metafictional, or a mix of various genres. The gothic and fantastic genres, for example, emerged from of a desire to escape the stifling conditions of the age, and this is true particularly for women writers. American women were "haunted" by the weight of the institutions that commanded their societal roles. Therefore, the ghost stories they wrote dealt with the social institutions of motherhood and marriage, as well as with issues such as madness and female sexuality (241). These haunting matters were "matters of which prescriptions of propriety forbade them to speak"–or in other words, matters which had been made invisible.[44] The fantastic proved, especially for nineteenth century British and American women, an effective way of "liberating the imagination from nineteenth-century realist and naturalist assumptions" (Olsen quoted in Morse, 3).

The fantastic "traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture; that which has been silenced, made invisible, covered over and made absent."[45] The texts under consideration in my study of contemporary African American literature attempt, I will argue, to recover what has been made invisible (by scientific discourses, more specifically historiography and anthropology, and realist fiction) and what has been silenced (by the limitations of literary genres), but also what has been repressed. For it is one thing to recover a past brutally damaged by the slave trade and practically erased by historiography, and another to recover *from* it.

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[44] Catherine Lundie, "One Need Not Be a Chamber," 241.

[45] Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, 4.

Ultimately, the use of the supernatural corrects some of the inadequacies of realism; it eliminates the need for authenticators and it allows for the representation of multiple realms–visible and invisible–of experience and reality. Yet what most interests me in this new aesthetic direction in the African American literary traditions is its potential as a vehicle for coming to terms with the traumatic "remembering" and "reappropriating" of a past drowned in the waters of the Middle Passage. The subsequent chapters will discuss the ways in which I see the supernatural, in Narratives of Recovery, function as a kind of Middle Passage, as a hovering zone between destinies–between the real and the unreal, the past and the present, the New World and Africa, the ancestors and the descendants. This time, however, the voyage is a healing one, sailing in the direction of recovery rather than loss.

CHAPTER 3
TRAVELING (THROUGH) TRAUMA: *KINDRED* AND *SANKOFA*

Psychologists contend that a perceived helplessness in the face of danger constitutes the most defining characteristic, "the essential insult," of a traumatic experience (Herman 41). The highly sophisticated institution of American slavery induced in its victims this essential insult, this helplessness, without which the system could not have operated as efficiently and enduringly as it did. It is true that many slaves, and various slave communities, devised ways to control or manipulate certain aspects of their fate. But as a general rule slavery rendered its victims powerless. To gain freedom, slaves exposed themselves to more traumatic cruelty and pain, to even more obdurate restrictions on their freedom. To gain freedom, they risked the very life they sought to reclaim from white oppressors.

Approaching slavery as a massive psychological trauma, as this chapter aims to do, inevitably demands that we face the capacity for vulnerability in black human nature, and the capacity for evil in white human nature. The heated contemporary debates over affirmative action and slave reparations reflect our reluctance to deal with both of these potential capacities. Those members of the black community who oppose job and education quotas for African Americans, and who are against financial compensations for centuries of free labor and abuse, fear that the message carried by these political measures can only hinder black upward mobility. They fear that it suggests an admission of inferiority; that it victimizes, indeed pathologizes, African American culture. White opposition to these measures stems from similar concerns; agreeing to these

compensations, financial or otherwise, equates with an admission of guilt on their/our part. I do not intend here to trivialize the complexity of these debates and to suggest that the line dividing people's positions on these issues is unequivocally drawn along racial, or other, categories. Rather, I am suggesting that understanding slavery and its legacies as the massive trauma perpetrated on one group by another has important ramifications, and entails navigating dangerous waters.[1] At the very least, admitting to the possibilities that our ancestors' actions may have inflicted such persistent psychic injuries on African Americans means, for white Americans, permanently disturbing the ideological comfort zone that we have constructed in order to protect us from facing this issue.

Commonly, we construct these comfort zones by faulting the character of the victim rather than that of the perpetrator, especially in abuse cases where the victimizer belongs to the dominant group of a given society, and the victim is identified as an "other." Laura Brown notes that until recently the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, the bible of psychiatric diagnosis, has defined a traumatized victim as a " person [who] has experienced an event that is outside the range of human experience."[2] This definition, she argues, problematically categorizes the traumas suffered by women, for example, as illegitimate traumatic experiences. Rape and incest, crimes predominantly perpetrated against female victims, too frequently invade the lives of women to be considered "outside the range of human experience." One could make a similar assertion about the African American experience(s) in the New World. Most blacks suffered from the

[1] African Americans are justified in fearing that an admission of psychic injury from the horrors of slavery may result in further discrimination. Anne Anlin Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race* documents some of the destructive outcomes of talking about racial grief and of admitting to the psychological damages incurred by racism.

[2] Laura S. Brown, in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* 100.

traumas of slavery and/or from the violence of subsequent institutionalized public discrimination. The various forms of oppression perpetrated on blacks occurred on such a large scale that it would be impossible to define these traumas as "outside the range."

This problem reflects the hegemonic systems of power endemic to American culture. The "human experience" referred to in diagnostic manuals, Brown deplores, most accurately refers to "male human experience," or at the very least, to an experience common to both men and women, and to blacks and whites:

> the range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. The trauma is thus that which disrupts these particular human lives, and not others. War and genocide, which are the work of men and male dominated culture, are agreed-upon traumas; so are natural disasters, vehicle crashes, boats sinking in the freezing ocean . . . our images of trauma have been narrowly constructed within the experiences and realities of dominant groups and cultures. (101, 102)

The way in which we privilege the experiences of dominant groups–in the ideological context of the West, this means male and white–is clearly illustrated by Judith Herman's discussion of what she terms "diagnostic mislabeling." Her research describes the process of explaining the abusive behavior of the dominant group by examining the characteristics of the victimized. For example, she notes, "the aftermath of the Holocaust witnessed a protracted debate regarding the 'passivity' of the Jews and their 'complicity' in their fate."[3] But perhaps the most illustrative example is the 1964 "The Wife-Beater's Wife" report. The researchers involved in this study of battered women found their attempt to interrogate male domestic abusers stunted by a reluctance, on the part of the men, to talk about their abusive behavior. They redirected their attention to the women, whom they found to be more cooperative. The study yielded frightening results: in the

[3] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 116, 115.

hands of these researchers, it is the battered wives, rather than their abusive husbands, who became responsible for the traumatizing experiences; the women's flawed personalities, their "castrating," "frigid," "aggressive," "indecisive," and "passive" characters caused their abuses. In short, the clinical picture of a woman who has been repeatedly abused and "who has been reduced to elemental concerns of survival is still frequently mistaken for a portrait of the victim's underlying character" (Herman 117).

The institution of American slavery could not have successfully continued to operate without a similar process of profiling. To justify the institution of slavery, slave owners claimed that blacks, without the benevolent paternalism of their masters, would not survive the rigors of American intellectual, economic, and moral life. From the cunning, lazy, carefree Negro to the submissive, hard-working, devoted Negro, white American culture constructed the profile of a race whose enslavement was justified by its own failures and deficiencies, its own peculiar, primitive characteristics.

In light of these few observations, which suggest that contemporary American culture still suffers from the injuries inflicted by slavery, I am compelled to wonder why very few studies–and no recent study–have analysed the behavioral patterns of both victims and perpetrators of American slavery in the context of PTSD, specifically post-traumatic symptoms of long-term traumas? After all, the study of massive trauma inflicted on a large group of people by another has become a vital site of inquiry at least since the first World War. I identify two major impediments to explain the paucity of research investigating the effects of slavery on American culture, and the texts that I have chosen to discuss in this chapter will be used to comment in detail on both these impediments.

Research suggests that the study of trauma necessitates a favorable social and political environment to assist its growth and development. "To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance . . . for the larger society, the social context is created by a political movement that gives voice to the disempowered." Herman contends that the study of PTSD on war veterans gained legitimacy only in the context of an anti-war movement whose appalled and angry adherents contested the careless slaughter of a country's youth. Until then, the soldiers traumatized by the experiences of war were thought to suffer more from cowardice and lack of manhood than from any legitimate psychological syndrome. The scientific study of women's traumas, such as sexual and domestic abuse, similarly gained momentum in the wake of a political movement challenging the subordination of women. "Advances in the field occur only when they are supported by a political movement powerful enough to legitimate an alliance between investigators and patients and to counteract the ordinary social processes of silencing and denial."[4]

Clearly, the political landscape of the 50s and 60s, which gave birth to such powerful movements as the Civil Rights and Black Nationalism should have provided us with the proper environment to trigger the study of the traumas of slavery. But neither of these movements succeeded in doing so–one because it was stunted by the murder of its leader, and the other because of internal ideological features that prevented not only the healing of the movement's adherents, but also its ability to expose slavery as the injurious trauma it really was. My discussion of Haile Gerima's film *Sankofa* revolves around the

[4] Herman, 9.

possibilities as well as the failures of the Black Power Movement to foster the development of a social imperative to study the traumatic injuries of slavery.

The second factor impeding the recognition and the study of slavery as a massive cultural trauma concerns the fact that the victims and the perpetrators of this crime have, after all, long been deceased. Even if psychoanalysts were willing to undertake such an endeavor, now that the interpretive tools are available, where would they begin? I do not intend to put forward that all African Americans descending from slaves carry within them the seeds of the unhealed traumas of American slavery. Nor am I suggesting that those who may indeed be experiencing traumatic symptoms are suffering from past atrocities with the same frightening, symptomatic pain as their ancestors. I am, however, proposing that the study of the traumatic effects of slavery should not be forsaken on the basis that the victims are no longer alive to document their experiences. The study of the traumas of slavery can be undertaken through the study of the narratives testifying to their realities, such as Octavia Butler's contemporary narrative of slavery *Kindred.*

I hope to show that *Kindred* can be read for the ways in which it highlights the similarities between the traumas suffered by the victims of long-term abuses and those suffered by slaves on American plantations. *Kindred's* explorations of the intricate bond between the masters and some slaves on a Maryland plantation can be or, more importantly, should be compared to studies that document the paradoxical relationships resulting from a victim's prolonged contact with an abuser. *Kindred* also probes the erosion of the slaves' identity that results from the violent traumas of slavery. Various psychoanalysts have documented the erosion of identity caused by the constant subjection to a series or combination of coercive methods–violence, enticement,

intimidation, seduction, rewards and punishments, etc. The victim's personality and sense of self become transformed in specific, recognizable ways. Even when violence is not used and the abuse operates on a subtler socio-psychodynamic level–such as in the case of colonial rule or institutionalized racism–the result is often a skewed sense of self and a paradoxical attachment to the oppressor. Butler's novel investigates the violent, destructive, process of attrition on the identities of African Americans under the American slavery system, as well as on the descendants of slaves, who struggle against the more subtle oppression of contemporary institutionalized racism.

My discussion of Butler's *Kindred* suggests a way to read the Narratives of Recovery as texts that expose the traumas of slavery and points to their similarities with other traumas, many of which attract legitimate interest and research from the psychological community. My analysis of Gerima's *Sankofa*, perhaps less "mechanical" than my reading of *Kindred*, critiques Gerima's approach to representing the traumas of slavery. It also theorizes about the Black Nationalist ideology within which the film's gender and racial narratives are formulated.

Before proceeding with my discussion of these two artistic productions, I would like to address one final theoretical concern that my project may raise. I argue that Narratives of Recovery, despite the fact that they are fictional, testify to both the traumas of slavery and the transgenerational traumas of slavery. Conventional historians who oppose the postmodern turn in history repudiate the notion of historical fiction as offering a legitimate source of knowledge about the past. It is important, they contend, to keep the scientific enterprise of history separate from the more frivolous venture of fiction. But postmodernists have stressed the porousness of the boundaries between history and

fiction.[5] The literary conventions (rhetorical, aesthetic, discursive) with which historical texts are constructed suggest that both forms of writing share important similarities. The Narratives of Recovery blur the lines between fiction and history–they are both fictional and historical.[6] They are doing history in a postmodern way because they deconstruct notions of truth, reality, and history.

Deconstructing these empirical fields is not without its risk. Exposing the degree to which they "avail [themselves] of the literary, hence fictional, plots and modes," can, and in fact has, led to serious ethical failings. Nancy Peterson rightfully warns that "if we are resigned to saying that all knowledge of the past is contingent and uncertain, then how can one argue against those who deny the Holocaust ever happened, or those who assert that the internment of the Japanese-Americans during World War II was for their own protection?" (9). Indeed, as the empirical social sciences of history and ethnography continue their "affair with 'subjectivity'. . . and righteously renounce any 'scientific' pretensions, [they are] becoming a storyteller's craft."[7] These failures of postmodernism compel us to ask yet more critical questions: "do counterhistories matter much if history

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[5] For an example of the anti-postmodern stance held by many contemporary historians, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Postmodernist History," in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese ed. *Reconstructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society.* For examples of texts discussing a postmodern approach to historiography, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*; Dominick LaCapra, "Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts"; Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century.*

[6] Terry Adkins's installations retell the story of John Brown's rebellion at Harpers Ferry; Jewell Parker Rhodes imagines the life of Marie Laveau, a New Orleans voodoo queen about whom little is known; Toni Morrison's *Beloved* grew out of the story of Margaret Garner, a woman who attempted to kill her children rather than see them returned to slavery; Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* was inspired by the theft of Josiah Henson's narrative by Harriet Beecher Stowe.

[7] Robben and Suarez-Orozco deplore these destructive consequences of postmodernist history and ethnography. They insist that "when turning to death camps, rape camps, and torture camps, the idea of treating events–and their representation–as 'fictions' becomes instantly repulsive." *Cultures Under Siege,* 12, footnote 8.

is purely fictional?" Can any claim for justice be "vigorously pressed without a firm sense of 'what really happened'?"[8]

My study of Narratives of Recovery requires such interrogations. I want to consider whether the process of fictionalizing the horrors of slavery renders them less "real." In other words, do Narratives of Recovery risk transforming slavery into a "fiction"? Furthermore, does the use of the supernatural in these narratives threaten even more the veracity, indeed the reality, of slavery? While I will briefly engage with these underlying questions at this point in the essay, the entire study will continue to be haunted by the presence and the implications of such possibilities.

Cathy Caruth's research on trauma indicates that the very fact of having lived through a traumatic experience prevents the victim from *really knowing* what happened. An experience is considered traumatic when it resists integration into existing mental frameworks, or into an existing reality scheme. The very incomprehensibility of the event, enhanced by its refusal to become integrated, prevents the victim from understanding it. The traumatic scene or thought, Caruth argues, "is not a possessed knowledge, but itself possesses," in such a way as to "produce a deeper uncertainty as to its very truth."[9] And this is especially true of repressed traumatic memories. "The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor's conception of it, so much that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events."[10]

The recounting of the events thus appears, at times, non-cohesive, unfocussed, even fabricated. And herein lies the paradox of historical traumas: it is crucial for the victim

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[8] Nancy Peterson, *Against Amnesia*, 8-9.

[9] Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 5.

[10] Laub, "Truth and Testimony," 64.

of trauma that his or her testimony be allowed to unfold "with all of its contradictions and enigmas." Furthermore, arguably the most important step in the treatment of victims of trauma is to "acknowledge unequivocally the *reality* of the events they endured."[11] The healing process rests on both these steps. Yet these very contradictions and enigmas compel social scientists to dismiss the testimonies as flawed, unreliable recollections. Laub illustrates the nature of this paradox with the example of a videotaped testimony of a woman imprisoned in a concentration camp during World War II. After a group of historians, artists, and psychoanalysts viewed the videotape,

> [a] lively debate ensued. The testimony was not accurate, historians claimed. The number of chimneys was misrepresented [the woman testified to seeing four chimneys go up in smoke]. Historically, only one chimney was blown up, not all four. Since the memory of the testifying woman turned out to be, in this way, fallible, one could not accept–give credence to–her whole account of the events. It was utterly important to remain accurate, lest the revisionists in history discredit everything.[12]

If the victims themselves fail to document traumatic events with the accuracy required by the scientists recording them into history, then who can? The perpetrator? I propose to shift, at least for this study, the burden from one of proof to one of healing.[13] If only temporarily, the narratives that this project engages with–written by the victims' descendants–will be valued for how they heal, rather than how they document, traumatic events. In fact, my readings of Narratives of Recovery show that the contemporary artistic impulse to recreate the traumatic realities of slavery and of the Middle Passage is as much a sign of trauma as one of recovery. The use of the supernatural in these

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[11] Robben and Suarez-Orozco, 7-8, 12 note 8.

[12] Laub, *Testimony,* 59-60.

[13] As discussed in Chapter one, the antebellum slave narrative was regulated, aesthetically and politically, by an oppressive burden of proof. Shifting the focus from proof to healing endows the texts with new levels of meaning.

narratives points to the presence of trauma. It enables the translation of painful memories in a way that resembles how they are experienced–in the forms of flashbacks, for example, or of intrusive, haunting thoughts, feeling, and images. At the same time, the process of articulating and transmitting the story through a narrative, of "reconstructing history and essentially, of *re-externalizing the event,"* is an undeniable sign of having integrated the traumatic event and, ultimately, a sign of healing.[14]

Kindred

> *Historical Memory in the United States, like race, is thus disclosed as subject to miscegenation: the "blood of the father," symbolic and mythologized, mixes with an African presence, literal and violated, imperiling the task of remembering and perpetuating a nation.*
> Russ Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation*[15]

In *Kindred,* Dana, the protagonist, finds herself propelled back in time against her will. Time tosses her from 1970s Los Angeles to antebellum Maryland without any warning other than a few seconds of dizziness and nausea. Even while she may be trapped, by time and by slavery, on the Weylin plantation in Maryland for months at a time, she returns to Los Angeles to find that she has been away for no more than a few hours. On the same day that Dana plans dinner in her modern kitchen, she is cruelly whipped by a plantation overseer–only to come back to Los Angeles to find the meat she had left to thaw still frozen on the countertop.[16] In the same day, she experiences both past and present. Her mission, once back in time on the Weylin Plantation, is to protect

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[14] Dori Laub, *Testimony,* 69.

[15] Russ Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom.*

[16] This temporal disparity suggests another symptomatic manifestation of trauma. Kai Erikson writes that trauma distorts our sense of temporality: "a chronicler of passing events may report that the episode itself lasted no more than an instant–a gunshot, say–but the traumatized mind holds onto that moment, preventing it from slipping back into its proper chronological place in the past." The time that both Dana and Kevin spend in the past appears to be (or is?) much longer–eight days in the present represents five years in the past. Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," 184-5.

the life of Rufus, the white master of the plantation, at least until he fathers the child with whom Dana's ancestral line begins. Whenever Rufus finds himself in a life-threatening situation, Dana instantly returns to antebellum Maryland.

"History," writes Cathy Caruth, "is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's trauma" (*Unclaimed* 24). Butler would agree–*Kindred* demonstrates the intertwining of black and white histories. Dana and Rufus are completely dependent on each other for their survival. Rufus relies on Dana to rescue him when he endangers his life. And Dana needs to rescue him, for without him, her existence is threatened; if he dies, her ancestral line dies with him. Dana's relationship with Kevin also testifies to the intimate connection between black and white destinies. During one of Dana's nauseous warning spells, alerting her that the uncanny time travel phenomenon is about to toss her back into the past, Kevin physically grabs onto her so as to be transported to the Weylin plantation with her. In the antebellum South, Kevin represents protection, "probably better protection for [her] than free papers would have been"– a considerable asset to a modern black woman (dis)placed on a slave plantation. But when Dana returns home to Los Angeles, Kevin will be left behind. It soon becomes clear that Kevin's destiny interconnects with Dana's. Without her, he must remain a captive of the past.

At the beginning of her narration of the story, Dana says, "the trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it, but June 9 is the day I remember" (12). Dana's unexplained journey through time, from 1976 Los Angeles to 1819 Maryland, begins shortly after she and her husband Kevin, newly wed, move into their new house. When they announced their wedding plans, Dana and Kevin encountered considerable resistance to their interracial union, but decide to marry despite their families' threats to

disown them both. They will spend the first year of their married life, much against their will, confronting the implications, the history–the echoes, really–of their interracial relationship. Indeed, Dana was right; the trouble started long before that. Butler's time travel dramatizes the echoes of the past as they reverberate through the present. Drowned in the American myth of freedom, equality, and democracy, these echoes are becoming fainter. Ultimately, the purpose of Dana's voyage to antebellum Maryland is to ensure the survival of Rufus, her white ancestor, for him to father Hagar, the woman who originates Dana's ancestral line. But more importantly, both she and Kevin are sent back to confront the pain, and to heal the wounds, of a twisted, convoluted, intertwined past.

The couple met while working at an auto-parts warehouse. While Kevin was a regular there, Dana was sent to this job through a placement agency she casually referred to as a "slave market." She soon realizes, however, that the labor agency "was just the opposite of slavery" (53). The ease and casualness with which she (ab)uses the expression "slave market," just at the moment when she and Kevin developed an interest in each other, seem to prompt the time travel. It soon becomes clear that Dana and Kevin's relationship echoes that of Rufus and Alice in 1819 Maryland, an interracial relationship fraught with violence and betrayal. Clearly, this story seeks to revisit the slave past as a place of trauma for both blacks and whites. Dana and Kevin's union echoes the initial encounter between blacks and whites, and the painful terms of centuries of abuse.

Dana's repeated experiences of slavery highlight the complexities of the process by which human beings are transformed into slaves. When first transported to antebellum Maryland, Dana has trouble adjusting to her new status. She looks her interlocutor in the

eyes when answering questions, she volunteers her opinion when it has not been requested, and she makes demands rather than obeys orders. She ponders, "there is something about me that these people didn't like–except for Rufus. It wasn't just racial. They were used to black people" (70). She receives advice, warnings even, from a few concerned slaves. As a result, she learns to lower her eyes and to offer only monosyllabic answers to whites' questions. Despite her efforts to abide by the proper code of behavior, slave owners still find her offensive, even threatening.

Slavery had not yet begun to slowly, surreptitiously dehumanize her; whites recognized in her the sense of self, fostered by her twentieth-century environment. It was too early in the game for Dana to have internalized the identity of a slave. It is only a matter of time until slavery begins to erode her identity. At first, it is no more than a vague feeling of discomfort. For example, when Kevin arranges to have her sleep in his room while they are both on the Weylin plantation, Dana feels like a slave who is "happily playing whore for [her] supposed owner" (97). Quickly, she recognizes that slavery is "a long slow process of dulling"(183), and understands "how easily people could be trained to accept slavery" (101). Eventually, her own involuntary yielding to the forces of slavery leaves her bewildered. The violence she experiences as a result of her failed escape attempt precipitates Dana's indoctrination into slavery:

> [Rufus and his father] took me in the barn and tied my hands and raised whatever they had tied them to high over my head. When I was barely able to touch the floor with my toes, Weylin ripped my clothes off and began to beat me. He beat me until I swung back and forth by my wrists, half-crazy with pain, unable to find my footing, unable to stand the pressure of hanging, unable to get away from the steady slashing blows. (176)

After the beating, twisted with pain, Dana pays attention to "a question in [her] mind that had to be answered. Would I really try again? Could I? In response, her thoughts keep repeating to her, "*See how easily slaves are made?"* (177).

Dana will not require another beating. Yet, despite the absence of further violence, her compliance with the slave system will continue the erosion of her identity, to her own dismay.[17] "Was I getting so used to being submissive?" she questions herself; "when had I stopped acting? Why had I stopped?" (221).

Like Dana, Alice also becomes enslaved, mentally and physically, during the course of the novel. The relationship between Rufus and Alice possesses the classic characteristic of an abuser's relationship to his long-term prisoner. First, the oppressor exercises "despotic control" over his victim. But compliance rarely appeases him. "Thus he relentlessly demands from his victim professions of respect, gratitude, of even love," exposing his destructive "psychological dependence upon his victim" (Herman 75-6). Indeed, simple compliance does not satisfy Rufus. He has eliminated the threat posed by Alice's husband by arranging to have Isaac sold South, and has succeeded in enslaving her despite the fact that she was born free. Yet, rather than force himself upon her, he demands that she come to him willingly–he expects her to like him, " 'maybe even love him,' "(232).

Victims of long-term abuse commonly experience a pattern of wavering, or oscillation, between weakness and courage, compliance and resistance, love and hate.[18]

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[17]Herman documents that "although violence is a universal mode of terror, the perpetrator may use violence infrequently, as a last resort. It is not necessary to use violence often to keep the victim in a constant state of fear. The threat of death or serious harm is much more frequent than the actual resort to violence" (77).

[18] Herman writes that "During the course of their captivity, victims frequently describe alternating between periods of submission and more active resistance" (85).

Clearly, Alice exhibits this symptomatic behavior. She considers running away rather than submitting to Rufus' sexual abuse. But her initial defiance soon transforms into fear and helplessness. She eventually obeys him, wishing she had the nerve to kill him. So "she went to him," Dana tells us. "She adjusted, became a quieter more subdued person. She didn't kill, but she seemed to die a little" (169). Her compliance will, once again, waver into resistance and she will resolve to run away to protect her children. This last dramatic attempt at freedom will never materialize. Rufus hears of her plans and, determined to teach her a lesson, lies about having sold the children she so desperately wanted to free. For Alice, the only act of resistance left is suicide. She hangs herself in the barn.

As a child, Rufus is physically and emotionally dependent on Dana. But as soon as he grows up and starts assuming the role of slave owner, his dependence takes the form of abuse. He demands from her, as he does from Alice, gratitude, love, and recognition for keeping her alive. His behavior parallels the oscillation pattern common to those of victims. He threatens and cajoles, appears powerful and powerless, he punishes and rescues. Once again, the scene describing Dana's failed escape clearly displays this paradoxical behavior. First, Rufus deploys his power by hunting her down and thwarting her plans of escape. Yet he also rescues her from his father who, after finding her in the bushes where she had been hiding, kicks her in the face and beats her. Rufus will wash the blood from her face and will comfort her. But just as she becomes lulled by his gentleness, he unthreateningly, gently even, announces " 'You're going to get the cowhide . . . You know that' " (176).

Because both Dana and Rufus have the power to end the other's existence, they both understand the crucial necessity of building a relationship based on trust, and to thoroughly delineate a set of limits each should not cross. But their relationship, like the one between Rufus and Alice, is tainted with the injurious agenda of the abuser. Rufus will eventually cross the line, twice in fact, violating the pact they make early on in their relationship. The first violation he commits is to hit her, like a common slave, in front of all who had gathered in anger and pain to watch, devastated, a coffle of slaves taken away. For Dana, this violation unequivocally defines her as the slave she has become. She will pursue the last option still available to her to escape her abuser:

> I turned my back and went to the cookhouse . . . At the cookhouse, I heated water, got it warm, not hot. Then I took a basin of it up to the attic. It was hot there, and empty except for the pallets and my bag, in its corner. I went over to it, washed my knife in antiseptic, and hooked the drawstring of my bag over my shoulder. And in the water I cut my wrists. (239)

People in captivity often fantasize about suicide and such attempts "are not inconsistent with a general determination to survive." Indeed, according to Herman, the decision to commit suicide is actually an active stance, inasmuch as it preserves in the victim an inner sense of control.[19] Dana's suicide attempt is literally an act of freedom; throughout the novel, any threat to Dana's life initiates the time traveling process and sends her back home to Los Angeles. Consequently, her suicide attempt will give her life, inasmuch as it will prompt her return to the safety of her own time. Dana's, as well as Alice's willingness to end their lives consist of an act of defiance, not one of retreat. For both of them, suicide becomes the only possibility for resistance. It is not surprising that the two

[19] Herman, 85. Orlando Patterson discusses suicide rates among African Americans in his sociological study of the legacy of slavery. He identifies it as a practice, in contemporary street culture, through which African American males can gain respect (*Rituals* 143-4). Also see Russ Castronovo's essay "Political Necrophilia," which explores the relationship between death and freedom. Castronovo describes suicide as "a self-chosen autonomous act" that "has all the trappings of liberty."

women share a similarly abusive relationship with Rufus, and that both escape his vicious hold through suicide. After all, the two women–one from the past, the other from the future–are in fact echoes of each other.

Following her suicide attempt, Dana will be called back to antebellum Maryland one final time. But on this last voyage, much has changed. Hagar, Alice and Rufus' baby, is born, insuring the survival of Dana's ancestral line. And, with Alice now dead, Rufus desperately needs someone else to love/hate/abuse. All along, he has recognized Dana and Alice's strange parallelism–the same woman from different eras. Rufus' decision to direct his sexual attentions to Dana–his second violation of their pact–will cost him is life. Dana finally finds the strength to end the abusive cycle by stabbing him to death. Here, she ends the relationship with her abuser, but also, symbolically, with an abusive past. She returns, permanently, to her life with Kevin in 1976 Los Angeles. Yet her break with the past does not leave her intact. While dying from the injuries Dana inflicts upon him, Rufus pulls on Dana's arm. Somehow, in the process of returning home, Rufus' hold on her arm severs it.

Why did Rufus not travel back to the future with her if he was holding onto her at the moment of time transfer? After all, Kevin used this very method to accompany Dana back and forth. Ultimately, since Rufus is now dying, he now represents nothing more than dead weight, an unnecessary burden, to Dana in the future. Butler underscores the importance of revisiting the past to see what we have left behind and what we have carried back with us. At the same time, she suggests that certain aspects of our past must remain in the past, lest the burden quell the recovery process. Dana's severed arm symbolizes the loss inherent in the process of recovery. Yet, although it will constantly

remind her of the cost of recovering (from) the past, her physical injury is not debilitating. She will continue to function normally, and will marry the white man she loves.[20]

Butler feels it is necessary for Kevin to visit the past, yet she denies Rufus the privilege of visiting the future. Perhaps we must read this thematic choice as an indication that the healing of trauma can only occur through a reliving of its events. Traveling forward through trauma suggests a process more akin to repression than to healing.

I read the use of the supernatural in this narrative, and in other Narratives of Recovery, as the link between the present and the traumas of history. The supernatural allows the authors to (re)present, in narrative form, events which often manifest themselves in non-narrative form, without jeopardizing the magnitude of their traumatic reality. Caruth warns of the effects of transforming trauma into narrative memory: "[the transformation] allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others', knowledge of the past, [but it] may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall."[21] The supernatural, I argue, protects the power of traumatic recall by providing the narrator/author/artist with the tools to escape the realist conventions imposed on narrations of history, or conventional narrations of black traumatic experiences.

If the supernatural, then, represents a sign of trauma, we must also read Kevin and Rufus as traumatized characters, since both also experience the uncanny confrontation

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[20] Dana loses her left arm. The loss of the right arm, at least for the right-handed majority, would have been a more incapacitating injury–especially for a writer in the process of (re)writing history.

[21] *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 153-4.

with a parallel temporal level. Rufus does not travel through time, but he interacts with someone who comes from the future. In fact, he usually catches a glimpse of Dana, in vision-like episodes, in her own home in Los Angeles before she is tossed back to him. Thus he too experiences the supernatural in a way that signals his own traumatic injuries, mostly inflicted upon him by his own family. Rufus' father physically abuses him in much the same way he does slaves–Tom Weylin beats, whips, and treats his son with contempt. His mother's inadequacies do little to redress the damage wreaked by Tom Weylin. Whereas Weylin denies his son love, his mother dispenses it in a possessive, pathetic, overbearing way. And here lies the keenness of Butler's vision. The traumatic past has left all injured.

The very environment in which these characters evolve–the antebellum South–is personified as an abuser. All of the characters eventually succumb to its injurious violence. Dana describes Tom Weylin as a man who "wasn't a monster at all. Just an ordinary man who sometimes did the monstrous things his society said were legal and proper" (134). Rufus is equally a victim of the environment. He learns from his father, and from the world around him, how to treat slaves and women. In the end, familial and societal power destroys Dana's every effort to influence him positively. Both she and Kevin also find themselves victimized by the environment. As Dana transforms from modern woman to slave, Kevin undergoes his own transformation. Although she understands the advantages of having Kevin with her in the past, she fears the consequences:

> a place like this would endanger him in a way I didn't want to talk to him about. If he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off in him. No large part, I know. But if he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate life here. He wouldn't have to take part in it, but he would have to keep

> quiet about it . . . the place, the time would either kill him outright or mark him somehow. (79)

Dana often points out his resemblances to the Weylin men: "[Tom Weylin's] eyes, I notice, not for the first time, were almost as pale as Kevin's" (90). Later, she notes that Kevin, like Rufus and Tom, spoke with an accent, "Nothing really noticeable," she says, "but he did sound a little like Rufus and Tom Weylin. Just a little"(190). Finally, she comments on the similarities between Kevin and Tom' facial expression: "The expression on his face was like something I'd seen, something I was used to seeing on Tom Weylin. Something closed and ugly" (194).

Through the socio-psychological framework used in this reading, the novel seems to propose a new alliance between black and white, one that disturbs the abuser/abused dichotomy. Trauma, explains Kai Erickson, produces in its victims a feeling of having been marked, or even cursed. "For some survivors, at least, this sense of difference can become a kind of calling, a status, where people are drawn to others similarly marked." The shared trauma creates "a common language and common backgrounds," "a spiritual kinship," a shared "sense of identity." People can come together and say to each other, "it is easy to be together. We don't have to explain things. We carry the same pain" (186). Indeed, Dana and Kevin, despite their respective racial identity, have forged a connection on the basis of a common trauma. "We had fifteen days together," Dana says before her final journey to Maryland:

> but at least Kevin and I had a chance to grow back into the twentieth century. We didn't seem to have to grow back into each other. The separations hadn't been good for us, but they hadn't hurt us that much either. It was easy for us to be together, knowing we shared experiences no one else would believe. It wasn't as easy, though, for us to be with other people. (243)

Butler is not proposing a facile solution to a history loaded with painful and frustrating memories. Undoubtedly, she suggests that if the injuries result from the synthesis of black and white destinies, the traumas cannot be healed individually; their interconnectedness must guide the healing process.

Sankofa

Le destin des divinités anciennes en travers du mien
est-ce raison de danser toujours à rebours la chanson?
Tchicaya U Tam'si, *Le Mauvais Sang*

Victims of trauma have trouble bridging the traumatic event(s) with their current lives. This failure to integrate the event(s) "suggests a permanent duality, not exactly a split or doubling but a parallel existence." The victim switches back and forth between these two levels of reality, which operate not as a sequence, but as a simultaneity. This simultaneity arises from the fact that "the traumatic experiences/memories are, in a sense, timeless." Thus victims have difficulty transforming these memories into a narrative that is placed in time and related along a chronological time scheme. Victims' "most complicated recollections are unrelated to time . . . trauma stops the chronological clock and fixes the moments permanently in memory and imagination, immune to the vicissitudes of time."[22]

Laub and Felman have also documented the uncanny temporal distortion that characterizes traumatic memories. They explain that,

> [T]rauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not end, did not proceed through its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both. (69)

[22] Bessel A. Van Der Kolk, "The Intrusive past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* 177.

The past and the present become merged in a simultaneity such that it becomes difficult for victims of trauma to differentiate between realities and between temporal levels. And until the victim relives the events and succeeds in telling the story, until s/he can narrate the events chronologically, the events will remain dislocated. The trauma creates a kind of fault line, if you will, that disrupts the uniformity of memory flow, until the events finally become integrated.

Like all Narratives of Recovery, Haile Gerima's 1993 film *Sankofa* explores this temporal dislocation. The story begins on the Coast of Ghana, at the Elmina Castle. This fortress, built in 1482, served as a storage place for Africans about to be sold into the Atlantic slave trade. Mona, an African American fashion model, and her white photographer choose this site for a photo shoot, but both ignore the history of these sacred grounds.

Sankofa, the self-appointed guardian of the Castle, preserves the grounds' sacredness and seeks to protect the connection that these grounds establish between the traumatic past and the present. The old man shares his name with a bird of prey, the Sankofa bird, an Akan symbol loaded with allusions and meaning. Sankofa means "return to the past in order to go forward." The image of the bird representing this dictum is portrayed as looking backwards, with its beak resting on its back.[23] The Sankofa bird alludes to the vultures that "followed the bloody wakes of the slave ships," and is often believed to be, in certain African cosmologies, the soul of an enslaved African returning to Africa.[24]

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[23] Sandra M. Grayson, *Symbolizing the Past,* 27.

[24] Sylvie Kandé, "Look Homeward," 1.

The old man Sankofa is disturbed by Mona's eagerness to display herself for the white photographer's camera. She obeys the photographer's sexually suggestive directives, "Let the camera get you hot," and "more sex Mona," as she poses by sprawling on the ground once soaked with the blood of her ancestors. Sankofa menacingly approaches her and orders her to go "back to your past, back to your source!" With the powers invested in him by the spirits of the dead, with whom he communicates through his drums, he "pass[es] judgment on Mona who has been selected to return and discover her African ancestry" (Grayson 26).

Sankofa's judgment will propel Mona into the past. After the photo shoot, she wanders towards the Castle, where a guide leads a group of visitors on a tour of the fortress. Enticed by the history the tour guide recounts to the tourists, she follows the group and enters the fortress. Once inside, the empty rooms suddenly fill with darkness, with the terrifying sounds of chains and of shackled African slaves. Her screams of horror at the uncanny occurrence only attract the attention of the guards who capture her, strip her, and brand her.[25] Here, her journey to the past begins; she becomes a prisoner, as were her ancestors before her. The branding transforms her from Mona to Shola, a house slave on the Lafayette plantation.

Shango, Shola's lover, belongs to the plantation's "secret society," a group of field slaves and neighboring maroons who secretly plot rebellions and escapes. He tries to convince Shola to join the society, but her position as a house slave makes her question her allegiances. She does not understand, and she even resents, her lover's quest for

[25] I use the term uncanny because of its appropriateness to the experience that these characters undergo. Freud defines the uncanny, or *unheimliche,* as "that class of the frightening that leads back to what is known of old and long familiar," which is "in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old –established in the mind and which has become alienated from it through the process of repression." ("The Uncanny" 123-4).

revenge, and thus refuses to participate in it. But she will eventually participate in the society's plan for insurrection when a series of traumatic events awaken in her a desire for freedom so strong that she becomes willing to kill for it.

The first and recurring catalyst for Shola's rebellious impulses is the sexual abuse she suffers at the hands of the overseer. Repeatedly, over the course of the film, we witness her being raped. Forcing her to all fours like an animal, the overseer takes her from behind, holding her by the hair. Sometimes the scene occurs in real time, sometimes in flashbacks, signaling its traumatic nature.[26] The sadistic rape of African and African American women, as it is represented in this film, signifies the explicit exploitation of the black female body by the white man.[27] The relationship between Mona and the white photographer for whom she exposes herself distantly echoes the violent theft of black women's bodies by white oppressors. The photographer exoticises, sexualizes, objectifies the black female body, a practice that can be, and indeed is in this film, traced back to the Atlantic slave trade. In fact, it is this very process of exploitation that initially triggers Sankofa's anger at Mona; it is why he sends her back to the past.

Gerima's willingness to confront and represent the traumatic experiences of black women under slavery loses its political effectiveness in two ways. First, in an interview conducted by Pamela Woolford, he denies the specificity of black women's abuse by the

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[26] "The essential element of rape is the physical, psychological, and moral violation of the person," Herman argues. "The purpose of the rapist is to terrorize, dominate, and humiliate his victim, to render her utterly helpless. Thus rape, by its nature, is intentionally designed to produce psychological trauma." She describes rape as a trauma that produces "high levels of persistent post-traumatic stress disorder, compared to victims of other crimes," 57-8.

[27] I do not intend here to suggest that black males were not also subjected to this traumatic abuse, although very little research has been conducted on this subject. However, heterosexual relations, for the white master, performed the double agenda of sexual gratification and increase of wealth. Every time the white master impregnated a female slave, he increased his own assets–every additional child represented for him a growth of property.

white slave institution. Although the two major female characters in the film (Shola and Nunu) suffer the traumas of rape, Gerima dismisses the importance and specificity of this experience,

> to me, Shola is a man, Shola is a woman. I didn't want men not to have the journey Shola takes, on the basis of gender. And to me, Nunu is a man, Nunu is a woman. And the gender thing that is now a major obsession within this society–while I recognize the importance of it, I wouldn't go to a very brutal position where Black men and Black women during slavery–a very brutal period–are divided on a gender basis. That would be too oppressive. (95-6)

The issues brought up by this quote are complex, and Gerima's position is undoubtedly informed by the masculinist politics of the Black Power and Afrocentric movements.[28] Gerima regroups the particular traumas of women under the broader category of "black oppression," an effort that implicitly treats the experiences of the "dominant" groups as representative of the norm.

The recuperating of black women's experiences under the more prevalent concerns of black males leads to another potential danger, namely the danger of appropriating a female experience and transforming it into a male trauma. Sankofa, the African male patriarch, sends Mona back to the past because of her failure to protect her body from the white abuser/photographer. She is being punished for becoming the white man's "object." Gerima's intention in privileging Sankofa's authority, I contend, is to assert the black man's right to the black female body, to reclaim it from the white man's control and appropriation. So the issue shifts from the objectifying and abuse of the black woman to the abandonment of the black man by her, and the confrontation of his own traumatic incapacity to protect her from the white man.

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[28] Gerima, born in Gondor, Ethiopia, came to the U.S. in 1967, during the most active period of Black Nationalism. He studied at the Goodman School of Drama and subsequently received his MFA from UCLA in 1976. His immersion in this politically charged period and in the intellectual enclave of UCLA has clearly influenced his art.

Furthermore, Gerima may be accused of the same process of objectification he attributes to the photographer, and to the white man in general. Ultimately, it is for his camera, not the photographer's, that Mona fully exposes herself. The Mona/Shola character certainly offers the viewer scopopholic pleasure and satisfies a certain voyeuristic need to witness violent acts.[29] The only graphic scenes of violence in the film involve women's bodies. Gerima repeatedly shows the rape of Shola by the overseer. Furthermore, all of the whipping scenes in the film involve women–while some men are also hung by their wrists on outdoors scaffolds waiting to be flogged, the viewers only see the actual lashing of women's bodies. And when Shola is the recipient of the flogging, she is first stripped naked before being whipped. The black female body, tied, exposed, and helpless, invites the male gaze. Gerima exposes Shola's naked body during the opening branding scene, during the whipping scene, and in a later scene when, returning to the present, she emerges from the Castle, nude.

Here, Gerima becomes trapped in the dilemma many intellectuals face when attempting to represent the unrepresentable. How do we represent moments and instances of supreme violence without making a spectacle of them? Could Gerima convey the magnitude of the violence done to the black female body without simultaneously offering it for visual consumption? If so, how? Most importantly, how can Gerima divorce his treatment of slavery from any "gender issues," when gender is so thoroughly ingrained in his narrative?

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[29] I draw here on Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytical study of contemporary cinema. In "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema," she explains that "mainstream film neatly combines spectacle and narrative." Both these elements, Mulvey argues, give women a "traditional exhibitionist role" where they are "simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearances coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (442). While Gerima's film could hardly be labeled mainstream, the Shola/Mona character nonetheless performs this exhibitionist role.

One of the whipping scenes merits a closer reading. After a failed escape attempt, a group of slaves are brought back to the plantation. Preparations are made for their public flogging. The overseer orders the two black headmen to start lashing their African brothers and sisters. Both are distraught by the order and attempt to get released from this duty, one by pointing out his inability to count the number of lashes to be administered, the other by complaining he is too weak to apply the proper amount of force that the task demands. Their efforts fail and they are ordered to proceed–one of the headmen counts the lashes while the other administers them. The victim during this particular scene is a pregnant woman, who will die of her injuries while still tied to the post.

The scene adroitly combines the traumas of both men and women slaves. Gerima courageously deals with blacks' own participation in the white man's oppressive system–a traumatic involvement that thoroughly erodes the victim's sense of identity, and continues to do so long after his or her release from captivity. [30] This treatment of the complicity of blacks in their own oppression should not be understood as a simple question of choice and will. The historian Lucy Dawidowicz argues that "'complicity' and 'compliance' are terms that apply to situations of free choice. They do not have the same meaning in situations of captivity."[31] The men are left with few alternatives. If they choose to disobey the orders, they will, at the very least, lose their somewhat elevated positions as supervisors of laborers, as overseers. At worst, they would be whipped or killed. Yet in the film, Gerima clearly marks these men as cowards. The choice is clear

[30] Herman points out that the victims' identity developed in freedom continues to include the memory of the enslaved self. She contends that "[I]f, under duress, she has betrayed her own principles or has sacrificed other people, she now has to live with the image of herself as an accomplice of the perpetrators, a 'broken' person. The result, for victims, is a contaminated identity"(94).

[31] Quoted in Herman, 115-16.

for him: African Americans must refuse to participate in their own oppression even if they must sacrifice their lives in the process.

This psychological branding of men as cowards, again, reflects the masculinist politics of the Black Power Movement of the 60s and 70s. Weakness, cowardice, and submissiveness belonged to whites' representation of black identity.[32] The importance of identity (re)construction should not be undervalued, and Van Deburg makes it clear: "the concept of self-definition was central to the Black Power experience. It was an essential component of the 'revolution of the mind' that militants believed was a prerequisite for the successful implementation of their plan for acquiring power. Before black people could hope to become influential . . . they had to define themselves" (26). The redefining of an injured identity is part of the healing process, but only if the injuries are worked through, not if they are denied. The Black Nationalist Movements and the cultural productions informed by their politics promote the repression of the injuries of slavery, preventing rather than inducing a cycle of recovery.

After having obeyed the white man's orders to whip the pregnant woman and her accomplices, both men seek solace, guidance, and absolution for their actions. Noble Ali reaches out for Nunu, and Joe, Nunu's mulatto son, looks for comfort in the words of father Raphael, the plantation's white Christian Priest. Nunu is an Akan African captured and brought from Africa. Joe, her mulatto son, is conceived on the voyage to the New World, when the members of the slave ship crew brutally rape her. Her character symbolizes Mother Africa; slaves revere her for her ability to preserve her African identity against the stifling pressures of American slavery. Shola tells us that, "in spirit

[32] "Believing that a people ashamed of themselves cannot hope soon to be free," writes William Van Deburg, blacks must reject any damaging construction of their identity and successfully redefine it as one characterized by strength and power. *New Day in Babylon,* 27.

you could see she was still living in her birth place, latching on to the memory of her home land." Noble Ali loves Nunu but she refuses to take him as a lover as long as he remains an accomplice of the white man. She tells him that he must choose between being a man or being a beast.

Joe, Nunu's son conceived out of rape, becomes Gerima's most self-defeating character. His devotion to Father Raphael and to the Catholic Church, as well as to the white slave owner, conveys a clichéd, one-dimensional representation of the mulatto who, torn between his white and black identities, tragically ends up rejected by both. The Catholic Church symbolizes Western colonialism, and Father Raphael serves as Joe's surrogate father. Father Raphael convinces Joe that his white blood marks him as special and superior to the other slaves, whom he refers to as heathens. Joe chooses to worship the white man's God and to disown all ties to the black community of the plantation.

The relationship between Joe and Lucy, a young black slave in love with him, dramatizes the conflict of the mulatto by once again situating it within the masculinist and androcentric context of the 60s and 70s' Black Nationalist politics. Despite Lucy's love for him, and despite her many attempts to initiate sexual contact, Joe finds himself incapable of establishing any connection, sexual or otherwise, with her or any other black woman. Joe's behavior should be read as sexual impotence, a reading supported by Lucy's angry cries of rejection when Joe, in the middle of intercourse, suddenly chases her out of his house: "You ain't no man Jo," she yells. Sylvie Kandé argues that Joe's sexual impotence "exploits a stereotype in the discourse of racial classification that would have it that the mulatto, like the mule or any other 'unnatural' product of the mixture of races, is sterile"(7). In fact, as she further suggests, "One can deduce from Joe's fate that

interracial relations only yield a hybridity that castrates the African spirit of rebellion" (7).

When asked about his stereotypical representation of the mulatto, Gerima claims that Joe's dilemma is not a result of his skin color. He explains that Joe "is light-skinned not because he was working with the white man. Nunu was raped by two white men on a slave ship. It's logical for me to have him light-skinned."[33] Joe, however, is the only light-skinned character in the film, and the only one who will not join the resistance movement. His violent conflicts of identity will continue to torment him and will eventually lead him to kill his own mother.[34]

The concern with purity of blood is nothing new. Whites have always worried that the infusion of black blood into white bloodlines would weaken the genetic makeup of the race. Thus, the more miscegenation and crossbreeding "lightened the race," the stronger the obsession with purity became. Black nationalists were equally concerned. Their efforts to redefine the black race could not be done without a set of clearly identifiable characteristics which could first *define* blackness–indeed a difficult task, since miscegenation shifted the location of blackness from the specifics and visibility of

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[33] Interview conducted by Pamela Woolford, 98.

[34] It is important to point out that the violence in the film is predominantly directed at women who are mothers. In fact, the only two black characters killed in the movie are mothers. This matricidal violence could offer further evidence of the film's ideological grounding in the masculinist Black Nationalistic politics of the 60s, more specifically in the "black nationalist discourse on family" (Rushdy, *Remembering,* 111). Such cultural productions as Jimmy Garret's "We Own the Night: A Play of Blackness" violently express the troubling desire by some black men to reclaim the power they believed has been appropriated by the castrating black woman. In this play, the hero shoots his mother in the back, symbolically asserting his manhood. See Rushdy, *Remembering Generations,* particularly chapter four, for a compelling treatment of these issues.

the body to the abstraction and invisibility of the blood. The 60s' growing obsession with "pure blood" cannot be divorced from Black Nationalist politics.[35]

The impurity of Joe contrasts with the purity of Nunu. Shola's American, middle-class existence and her association with the white man, dramatized in her relationship with the photographer, also mark her as impure–until her immersion in the traumas of the past cleanses her.

During a slave revolt on the Lafayette plantation, Shola kills her oppressor, the white overseer who continually rapes her. After the murder, the camera captures Shola running for her life in an open field as the Sankofa bird flies over her, grabs onto her with its talons, and carries her back to modern Africa. The movie ends with Shola emerging, nude, from one of the narrow corridors of the Castle–the metaphoric birth canal–releasing her into her new identity, her new life, her new consciousness. Having revisited the traumatic past, she chooses to remain in Africa. The Castle's grounds have been cleansed of the white tourists, including Mona's photographer. The sacred site has now been reappropriated by Sankofa, its guardian, and a group of Africans who have also, we are to assume, undergone the journey back. Mona seems to have been partially healed, if not from the traumas of the past, at least from the alienation caused by her westernized lifestyle. Yet her face retains a haunted look as she joins the African group gathered around Sankofa and his drums. Perhaps, as with Dana's loss of an arm during her return to the present, Mona's grim resolute face implies the presence of loss in the midst of healing.

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[35] For a discussion of the issue of blood purity in the context of the 1960s' black politics, see Rushdy, *Remembering Generations,* 100-09.

It would be erroneous, as well as disrespectful to its noble goals and remarkable accomplishments, to deny the Black Nationalist Movement's participation in the (re)empowerment of the black communities–at least those it succeeded in reaching. But the failure to heal the wounds of the past displayed at the end of Gerima's film mirrors the failures of the Black Nationalist Movement, whose greater potential for healing was stunted by some of the movement's key ideologies.

Both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement raised awareness about, and sought to dismantle, the institutionalized oppression of African American citizens. These movements certainly prompted important changes in the way the American intelligentsia–historians, literary scholars, sociologists, psychologists, and lawyers–approached the study of African American culture, and particularly the study of slavery. In fact, Ashraf Rushdy situates the very development of the neo-slave narratives within the vibrant setting of the 1960s and considers it a direct result of the political landscape of that period. The emergence of the Black Power movement and the rise of the New Left social history during this period prompted a shift in the way historians were to look at, and subsequently represent, slavery. This shift in the historiographical representation of slavery, Rushdy insists, is crucial to the formation of a new discourse on racial politics, out of which neo-slave narratives arise, and to which they contribute and respond.

Ultimately, the black political movements of the 60s and 70s induced a vibrant exchange of ideas, prompted revolutionary scholarship, and generated a shift in the academy which, in turn, positively affected black and white race relations. They did not,

however, prompt the study of slavery and its legacies as a legitimate investigation of massive trauma.

I contend that the nature of the Black Power Movement inhibited the study of black culture as one injured by the traumatic realities of slavery. Black Nationalism proclaimed black power, black beauty, and black rights. It insisted on breaking away from the ideology of prior generations, which Black Nationalists considered accomodationist and assimilationist. It proclaimed a martial manhood, and banished all thoughts of vulnerability and victimization, a strategy captured by the words of Margaret Walker: "Let the martial songs be written, le the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control."[36] The Black Nationalists attempted to overturn the failures and inadequacies of their progenitors; it sought to restore a sense of efficacy and power to a people weakened by, and still prone to, helplessness in the face of pervasive racism. It acknowledged–indeed it vociferously denounced–centuries of white oppression; but simultaneously and paradoxically, it also sought to reverse, and in a way erase, repress even, the injuries caused by this oppression. It was crucial to the Black Power Movement to reconstruct the black persona as strong, valiant, powerful.

Yet, the very process of forming a political movement around the cause of black oppression entails the sharing of a common experience of victimization. Ultimately, black Nationalists feared, most of all, Frantz Fanon's diagnosis that "for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white." Black Nationalists fought desperately against this fate and believed, as Albert Memmi did before them, that revolt was the only way out

[36] This quote is used as an epigraph by Addison Gayle Jr. in *The Black Aesthetic.*

of an oppressive, ambiguous relationship with the oppressors.[37] Inherent in this movement was the belief that healing could only be achieved through a repression of black injury, a repression crucial to promoting a sense of black power and strength. Rather than work through the injuries of the traumas of slavery, the Black Power movement wished to banish them from memory. This repression could be achieved, its leaders believed, by a return to an idealized pre-traumatic existence. Black Nationalists, more specifically Afrocentrists, advocated a rejection of all things American, and an espousing of all things African. This rejection was also a kind of repression, if you will, of the traumatized past.

Inadvertently, Black Nationalism may have contributed to spreading, rather than repressing, the very traumatic memories it sought to purge.[38] Trauma, many psychologists and psychoanalyst believe, can be transmitted from the victims who suffered them to their descendants, or to others, whose membership in the same group as the victims' exposes them to the threat of the same trauma.[39] Antonius Robben and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco concur with Laura Brown's and others' theories on the transgenerational transmission of trauma. As they observe, "massive traumas do not just nestle themselves in the victim's inner world; they are transmitted within the family and across generations" (44). Past humiliations, as well as feelings of shame, loss of self-worth, and helplessness, are transmitted from parent to child, from one generation to the

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[37] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 10; Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 127.

[38] T.M. Luhrmann writes that "the formation of a political identity within a social movement may also involve the activation and reactivation of traumas that have not yet been personally experienced but are instead culturally articulated memories of socially distant traumas that take on an important role in mobilizing others within a social movement." T.M. Luhrmann, "The Traumatized Social Self: the Parsi Predicament in Modern Bombay, in *Cultures Under Siege*, 249.

[39] See Laura S. Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma."

next, sometimes in the hopes that the future generation "will undo the past harm and humiliation" (23).[40]

The traumas of slavery continue to be passed down to subsequent generations, I propose, because African Americans have had little opportunity for healing. The three stages of recovery necessary for the healing of trauma are safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life.[41] The first and most crucial stage of regaining a sense of safety involves a restoration of power and control, a stage impossible to achieve under slavery. After emancipation, the conditions were, Orlando Patterson has argued, even more precarious. While African Americans, under slavery, benefited from a form of protection–ultimately, they represented a capital investment that the masters wished to protect–nothing could shield them, after the Civil War, from the shame and frustration of the defeated South. The wrath of the KKK, manifested in thousands of lynchings, engendered a new traumatic reality for ex-slaves, a reality that imposed on them a way of life riddled with the constant threat of trauma.[42]

"*Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. He smelled skin,*

[40] Yolanda Gampel, psychoanalyst and Professor of Psychology at Tel Aviv University, has developed a concept of "radioactivity" to describe the ways in which traumatic experiences "penetrate people's psychic constitution," and continue, when repressed, to damage the mental health not only of the patients, but of the generation to follow. In this failure to come to terms with the effects or their traumas, parents place the burden of their suffering on their children, sometimes "forcing them to enter their own nightmarish world," 48.

[41] Herman, 159.

[42] I draw here from a talk given by Patterson at the University of Florida, in October 2001, as well as from his book *Rituals of Blood,* 172-181.

skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing, but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing. The stench stank. Stank up off the pages of the North Star, out of the mouths of witnesses, etched in crooked handwriting in letters delivered by hand. Detailed in documents and petitions full of whereas and presented to any legal body who'd read it, it stank. But none of that had worn out his marrow. None of that. It was the ribbon . . . a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wooly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp. He untied the ribbon and put it in his pocket, dropped the curl in the weeds. On the way home, he stopped, short of breath and dizzy. He waited until the spell passed before continuing on his way. A moment later, his breath left him again. This time he sat down by a fence. Rested, he got to his feet, but before he took a step he turned to look back down the road he was traveling and said, to its frozen mud and the river beyond, 'What are these people? You tell me Jesus. What are they?" (180).

In addition to this threat, African Americans faced, during and after Reconstruction, a series of debilitating obstacles–economic hardships, segregation and other forms of institutionalized discrimination, violence, denied access to education, etc–leaving the possibilities for a space from which to regain power and control quite limited. Only in the 1950s and 1960s did the Civil Rights Movement begin to create such a healing space. The process of healing requires an acknowledgment of the traumatic experiences, by both the victim and his or her victimizers. The demands made by blacks and the resulting "concessions" of these demands yielded by whites acted as recognition, by both parties, of the injustices suffered by blacks. Tragically, the death of Martin Luther King Jr. prematurely thwarted the movement's healing potential.

The Black Power Movement may have come closest to engendering a cycle of healing. It sought to restore power and control to the victims of American racist institutions, and succeeded, to a certain extent, to re-empower at least a number of black men. But its political agenda could not have carried its members to the second healing stage of mourning and remembrance. It confused mourning with weakness, therefore discouraged it. Furthermore, although Black Nationalists ultimately sought to mend the gap between black diasporic cultures and reconnect with the past from which they were so brutally torn away, the movement paradoxically induced new ruptures. It favoured the remembrance of a distant, African past, but denied a remembrance of the more recent, injurious one. Ultimately, the very concept of a revolution cannot exist without ruptures, since its very nature is grounded in the overthrow of an old system for a new one.

Both Butler and Gerima (re)tell the stories of slavery by collapsing the past and the present into one temporal level, suggesting that recovering (from) the past necessitates a return to the location of trauma. Ultimately, both protagonists kill their oppressor to free themselves from the symptoms of traumatic recall, triggered by the unhealed traumas of the past. As a result, now that the traumatic memories of the past have been integrated, Dana and Mona return to their respective present and begin the healing process.

Inescapably, Narratives of Recovery are impelled by the need to mend an unsettled sense of identity and to end a persisting feeling of placelessness. The characters in these narratives, never quite belonging to this New World and never again to feel at home in Africa, hover, like the very hyphen separating their dual identities, between two tenses, two identities, two realities.

Liminalities rather than absolutes, then, may island a space whence to read these Narratives of Recovery. Butler's project, I contend, more skillfully navigates the indeterminate zone between obsessiveness with race and total abandonment of racial identity. In that indeterminacy lies partial loss as well as the partial freedom of recovery.

CHAPTER 4
TRAUMATIC REPETITIONS IN NAYLOR'S *MAMA DAY*, PARKS'S *THE DEATH OF THE LAST BLACK MAN IN THE WHOLE ENTIRE WORLD*, AND LEMMONS'S *EVE'S BAYOU*

In modern trauma theory, Cathy Caruth writes, "there is an emphatic tendency to focus on the destructive repetition of the traumatic experience in a person's life." While the repetitive pattern often manifests itself in the form of flashbacks and dreams, it also surfaces in the form of repeated occurrences, for example as a victim who compulsively repeats or recreates painful events, or a "woman condemned repeatedly to marry a man who dies."[1] These repetitive patterns, Freud contends, are not always initiated by the traumatized individuals. Often, the victims become possessed by a sort of fate over which he or she has no control.

Caruth explores Freud's studies of repetition compulsion through the reading of a passage in Tasso's romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata,*

> its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armor of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusader's army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again."[2]

This quote illustrates a crucial aspect of trauma theory, namely that the "haunted repetition," to use Eleanor Kaufman's term, of the traumatic experience allows the victim to finally face, indeed interpret, the traumatic occurrence, an event that cannot be known in the first instance of its occurrence. The threat posed by the traumatic event is never

[1] Cathy Caruth, "Traumatic Departures: Survival and History in Freud," 33.

[2] Cathy Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 1-2.

immediately known. Rather, it is only recognized after the fact. Hence, the shock to the mind by the traumatic event "is not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known."[3]

The whispering tree in Tasso's poem triggers my memory of the tree on Sethe's back and invites me to recall Toni Morrison's text, which I weave through this chapter:

The traumatic past in Beloved *takes on a life of its own when it returns in the flesh as Sethe's murdered daughter. The ghost of Beloved, however, stands as a somewhat volatile trace of the past–it disappears by the end of the narrative. Yet Morrison has also inscribed the text with more indelible traces of the past, such as the one etched onto Sethe's back. Majestic in the pain to which it testifies, the tumescent whipping scar on her back is shaped like a tree–a chokecherry tree, Sethe explains to Paul D when, in disbelief, he uncovers/discovers the wound.*

The tree-shaped mutilation on Sethe's body "mediates between Paul D and Sethe when they first make love and serves as a roadmap for memory/rememory back to Sweet Home."[4] Sethe's chokecherry tree prompts the sexual encounter between Sethe and Paul D, and ultimately triggers the ensuing process of remembering. Each character's story fills in the gaps, completes if you will, the other's. Only after hearing Sethe's story about the traumatic whipping and the stolen milk does Paul D finally comprehend why Halle had suddenly gone mad. Although Paul D is haunted by the images of Halle gone mad, sitting by the churn with butter all over his face (69), he finally comes to know the circumstances of Halle's madness from the chokecherry tree. Only after Paul D shares

[3] Cathy Caruth, "Traumatic Departures: Survival and History in Freud," 32.

[4] Sharon Patricia Holland, *Raising the Dead*, 54.

with Sethe his traumatic memories does Sethe finally learn what happened to her husband Halle, and does she understand why he did not show up at their arranged meeting place. The fleshy scar whispers to Paul D and Sethe what they could not have known in the first instance of occurrence. The tree, then, shelters not only their embrace; it shelters their journey through rememory and through healing.

The recurrence of traumatic events, either in the form of flashbacks or of haunting repetitions, often performs a healing function. The traumatic event, unable to be assimilated within the victim's conceptual framework, continues to occur until it becomes known, until it is translated into an assimilable form, one that eventually takes its place within a linear temporal scheme. Once assimilated, the traumatic event becomes an "ordinary" memory–one that is recalled at will, rather than against one's will. But this recurring process, triggered by the body to induce healing, also possesses the power to further injure. Modern neurobiologists suggest that the repetition of the trauma "can itself be retraumatizing; if not life-threatening, it is at least threatening to the chemical structure of the brain and can ultimately lead to deterioration. And this would seem to be the case with the high suicide rate of survivors . . . who commit suicide after they have found themselves completely in safety."[5] The repetitive "loss of peace" in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, as well as the recurrence of fatally broken hearts, as this chapter will argue, is one such example of the injurious nature of some repetitive traumatic experiences. These traumatic repetitions bring only pain, not healing, to the members of the Day family and the other inhabitants of Willow Springs.

[5] Caruth, "Traumatic Departures," 33.

"Most outright," Bruce Kawin argues, "repetition simply aims to make us remember something" (35). Clearly, Gloria Naylor's repetition of certain passages and of particular tragedies, Kasi Lemmons's decision to kill Mozelle's husbands in *Eve's Bayou* over and over, and Susan Lori Parks's "Rep & Rev" (Repetition and Revision) technique applied to dialogue force the reader to confront the meaning, indeed the history, that these repetitions carry. The process of repetition can produce anamnesis, but it can also produce its opposite effect, manifesting itself as an anesthetic against painful memories. Repetition, or the act of repeating an action or memory, can transform the traumatic memory into something "habitual," or void it of its power. "We may remember something frightening so many times that it will no longer be frightening . . . . Repetition without insight or excitement creates routine, takes the life out of living, and *cannot cause us pain*. The idea is to make our entire lives routine, so that we will not feel anything–to thicken the skin on our senses."[6] This symptomatic manifestation of repetition is demonstrated by Louis's repetitive adulterous trespassing in *Eve's Bayou*. His family has learned to live with Louis's behavior, merely lulled, anesthetized if you will, by its painful but constant recurrence.

The repetition of painful experiences–prompting either amnesia or anamnesis–can manifest itself during the span of a character's particular lifetime. As well, it may expand beyond the boundaries of generations, seeping through familial lineage. Traumatic events echo, or reverberate, transgenerationally, often becoming a culture's or a people's legacy.

The presence of repetition in the texts discussed below signals the presence of traumatic injury. In this chapter, I want to proceed to a reading of the chosen texts by

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[6] Kawin, 20, 28.

exploring the complex ways in which traumatic repetitions manifest themselves in the lives of these fictional characters.

Mama Day

Gloria Naylor's 1993 novel *Mama Day* seeks to mend, heal, and understand damaged familial relationships. The prefatory records included in the opening pages of the novel–consisting of various documents such as a genealogical tree of the Day family, and a bill of sale for the African slave Sapphira–establish the importance of this concern with filial relationships. The novel explores both the devastating effects of slavery on individual relationships, and the orphaning of Africans as a group. The living conditions under the system of American slavery prevented black families from laying claim to their progeny. Families were commonly broken up, their members sent away to other parts of the country never to be seen again. The theme of broken familial relationships symbolized by the islanding of the novel's setting also applies, in one form or another, to the life of every character in *Mama Day*.[7]

The opening pages of the novel also provide us with a map of Willow Springs, suggesting that the land in *Mama Day* is part of the genealogical project: "Blacks were originally taken from the land, and the journey back to origins has to start with the

[7] The island of Willow Springs stretches "toward Georgia on the south end and South Carolina on the north," and lies "right smack in the middle where each foot of [the] bridge sits is the dividing line between them two states" (5). Neither Georgia nor South Carolina can lay claim to it, as the island does not belong to any state. The fact that the island of Willow Springs does not "belong" to any state (it doesn't even appear on any maps), and the fact that its inhabitants, most of whom are descendants of Sapphira and Bascombe Wade, are "denied the name of its tutelary spirit," symbolize the ravages induced on African culture and lineage by the African slave trade and by institutionalized slavery (David Cowart, "Matriarchal Mythopoesis," 9). Even if Africans brought to the New World succeeded in recreating a sense of African identity and bestowing it upon their land and communities, as the inhabitants of Willow Springs have done, religious and cultural syncretism would prevent this land from *really belonging* to either geographical location. By creating this fictional island of Willow Springs, which stands as an orphan of sorts, the author signifies on this geographical, cultural, and ancestral disconnection.

reappropriation of the land."[8] This piece of land owned by the African American characters in the novel acts as a link to the traumas of the ancestors. In fact, it is personified as a nurturing ancestor–one who provides nourishment, shelter, healing, even financial security; one who whispers wisdom and guidance to those who choose to listen.

The repetitive cycles of trauma in *Mama Day* find their genesis in the family's original ancestors, a Norwegian man named Bascombe Wade who moved to the island with his slaves, and the slave woman whom he married and to whom he deeded the land in 1823, Sapphira Wade. Different versions of the story of Sapphira and Wade circulate amongst the people of Willow Springs. The first account reports that after having tricked Bascombe Wade into deeding her the island, and after having borne him seven sons, Sapphira killed her husband in his sleep and flew back to Africa. This particular version diverges into various sub-versions: Sapphira may have smothered her husband in his sleep, poisoned him, or stabbed him in the kidney; and the seven sons she bore him may or may not have been all his. The second recounts that Wade died of a broken heart after Sapphira left him to return, "by wind," to Africa.

Whatever the people of Willow Springs know about Sapphira, they know from their "inner minds," because "she don't live in the part of [their] memory [they] can use to form words" (153, 154). For them, she is the unnamed woman who was owned by Bascombe Wade and who, when freeing herself from Wade's patriarchal hold and literal ownership, broke his heart.

In this miscegenational relationship, tainted with the imbalance of racial power, lies the original "loss of peace"–a recurring and central theme in the novel. Bascombe Wade could not find peace after the passing of his wife, and Sapphira could not peacefully

[8] Christol, "Reconstructing American History," 348.

reconcile the violent history of abuse and enslavement with the more tender marital relationship she shared with the white man who was simultaneously her husband and her owner. Repetitively, the loss of peace that afflicts the women of Willow Springs, and the heartaches that plague the men who strive to restore that peace, continue to dismantle the familial relationships of Sapphira and Wade's descendants for generations. Peace–Miranda and Abigail's baby sister–accidentally drowned in the family well. Ophelia, Peace's mother, drowned herself in the Sound out of grief for the loss of her daughter. Her husband John-Paul, who "couldn't give [his wife] Peace," never quite recovered from losing his wife (262). The traumas of the child's death, of the suicide of the mother, and of the father's broken heart echo through yet another generation. Abigail, who suffered deeply from both deaths and from her father's despair, named her first daughter Peace in an effort to "bring back peace" to the family history, but the child also died when still an infant.

Cocoa, Abigail's niece and descendant of Sapphira, and her husband George are next in line to suffer the wrath of Willow Springs' repetitive traumas. Cocoa, born and raised on Willow Springs, now lives in New York City. Nonetheless, she never fails to return to the island every year in August. Despite the fact that her mother "died young" and that her father ran off before she was born, the maternal love and guidance she received throughout her life from her grandmother Abigail and great-aunt Miranda have insured her sense of belonging and connectedness to the history saturating her birthplace. Which is not to say that she is unaffected by the traumatic cycles of her family history; she feels deeply insecure about the lightness of her "golden" skin. So insecure, in fact, that Miranda and Abigail nicknamed her Cocoa so as to "put color on her somewhere"

(40). As a little girl, she made herself bleed, "fearing she really had the white blood she was teased about at school" (47); she hated the thought that she might be carrying some of Wade's blood (47). By repudiating Bascombe Wade's blood, Cocoa attempts to protect herself from the "story of violence and rape"–the story of American slavery, really–that Wade represents.[9]

For George, Cocoa's shame "was a privilege few of us had. We could only look at our skin tones and guess. At least you knew" (219). The absence of genealogy, rather than the presence of a miscegenational one, carries the seeds of George's trauma. "You had more than a family," he tells Cocoa, "you had a history. And I didn't even have a real last name" (129).[10] George's mother, a fifteen-year-old prostitute, left her three-month-old son "lying on a stack of newspapers," where he was found and brought to a shelter for boys (131). After abandoning him, George's mother committed suicide. Like Sapphira and Ophelia, she drowned herself.

Betty Jean Lifton documents the traumatic consequences of adopted children's disconnection from familial or historical ties. She writes that "if your personal narrative doesn't grow and develop with you, with concrete facts and information . . . you cannot make the necessary connections between the past and future that everyone needs to grow into a cohesive self" (22). Indeed, George's entire stay at the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for boys is punctuated by the constant repetitions of such statements as "Keep it in the now, fellas," and "Only the present has potential, *sir*" (22-3).

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[9] Hélène Christol, "Land and Genealogy," 351.

[10] This comment echoes, once again, the conditions of slavery. Slaves carried the last name of their owners, rather than their own "real" names.

George's childhood in a shelter for boys disconnects him from past and future. It also disconnects him from female contact, maternal or otherwise, a condition that hardly changes after he leaves the shelter. As an adult, he becomes an engineer and constructs his existence around a very masculine world ruled by science, rationality, tangibility, and calculable outcomes; a world that allows him a considerable amount of control. As Virginia Fowler points out, George organizes "his life to the minutest detail. He views relationships–and indeed all of life–in the same way that he views engineering problems in his job" (110). Conversely, life on Willow Springs is imbued with the presence and power of women.[11] Thus, his blind attempt to "connect with a woman who is the heir-designate of all the mysteries represented by [Willow Springs'] matriarchal power" is bound to lead to a broken heart. [12]

George's visit to Willow Springs triggers the resurgence of his childhood trauma–kept under control until then by his cautiously engineered and controllable world. His very first encounter with Cocoa's grandmother Abigail, who "put each hand up on each side of [his] face," leaves him shaken: "Well, bless your heart, child," Abigail maternally whispers. George confesses that "a lump formed in my throat at their gentle pressure. Up until that moment, no woman had ever called me her child" (176). He cannot deflect this experience in his customary language: "I couldn't have summoned up something light to say even if my life depended on it" (176).

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[11] Miranda is the matriarch of Willow Springs. Her privileged status on the island derives from her "being a direct descendant of Sapphira Wade, piled on the fact of springing from the seventh son of a seventh son" (6). Furthermore, "to show up in one century, make it all the way through the next, and have a toe inching over into the one approaching *is* about as close to eternity anybody can come" (7). Miranda's knowledge of roots and plants, her ability to hear the voices of the ancestors–of the land, really–and her "gifted hands," all gifts from Sapphira Wade, have made her the healer, sage-femme, and mother, not only of her family, but of all the inhabitants of Willow Springs.

[12] David Cowart, "Matriarchal Mythopoesis," online version, 8.

For George, the world of Willow Springs–with its overwhelming maternal presence and haunting genealogical grounding–is a world over which he has no control. It echoes the helplessness he experienced as an orphaned child suffering from both the emotional pain of abandonment, and the physical ailment of a congenital heart condition. Willow Springs, then, as well as confronting him with the legacy of men who die of "broken hearts," brings back to the surface his repressed feeling of helplessness.

Consciously, George finds himself somewhat unsettled by the reality of Willow Springs. He struggles to "describe air that thickens so that it seems as solid as the water, causing colors and sounds and textures to actually float in." The land itself contains and exudes the history to which the Day family belongs, reflecting the past as it exists in the present, distorting conventional notions of reality, time, and space. "Time don't crawl and time don't fly" on the island. It is malleable; "you do what you want: roll it up, stretch it out," or "just let it lie" (161). If George was asked to describe the feel of the island, he would say "that it all smelled like forever" (175). The very language spoken by the people of the island is incomprehensible to him; a week in Willow Springs, he finally recognizes, "was enough to understand that words spoken here operated on a different plane through a whole morass of history and circumstances that I was not privy to" (256). George's ability to understand and accept the reality of Willow Springs would symbolize the integration of the traumatic experiences of his childhood into an existing mental framework, and ultimately, signal a process of recovery.[13] But the task proves impossible for him. "What do you do," he pleads, "when someone starts telling you something that you just can't believe?" (286). Tragically, the more George feels out of control, the more desperately he attempts to "hold on to what was real" (291). But holding on to what he

[13] For a more detailed discussion of these processes, see chapter two, "Traveling Through Trauma," 9.

considers real is precisely what denies him the ability to respond to Mama Day, who wants for him to "connect [it] up with all the believing that had gone before," so that "together they could be the bridge for Baby Girl to walk over" (285).

Susan Meisenhelder contends that George's "immature theatrical bravado" makes him the "tragically flawed hero" in the white Shakespearian tragedies he identifies with (120-121). For her, George is a product of white, urban, masculine culture. Having been disconnected from his black heritage, he fails to understand the world of Willow Springs and to embrace what the novel portrays as the more genuine, uncorrupted, spiritual way of life of its inhabitants. Many of his actions, she argues, such as his long-term interracial relationship with Shawn, expose the lack of "blackness," or the "whiteness," of his character. His obsession with control and self-sufficiency–characteristics belonging to the domain of white male culture, according to Meisenhelder–is what lead him to expose Dr. Buzzard's duplicitous poker games, prevents him from working with, rather than against, the men rebuilding the bridge after the storm and, most of all, impedes his ability to believe in Mama Day's powers. Because he belongs to the white world, he finds the reality of the island incompatible with his own.

But I would argue that George's flaws are less the result of his "selling out" to white culture than they are a result of the author's Afrocentric agenda.[14] Unlike the other major characters in the novel, George's individuality dissolves under the thematic pressures of constructing him as a "type" capable of representing the white patriarchal oppression that has engendered Willow Springs's cycles of trauma.

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[14] My use of the term Afrocentric in the context of such a feminist (or womanist) text may appear problematic considering the androcentric character of this movement. By my use of the term, I intend to emphasize the author's privileging of African, over American, philosophies, politics, and lifestyles.

The novel is built around a series of binary oppositions, such as masculine/feminine, city/country, science/nature, individuality/community, white/black, present/past, Western/non-Western. Despite this somewhat problematic construction of the story's operational frame, the author nonetheless manages to bring to life rich and complex female characters who negotiate between these dualistic positions. For example, Mama Day exemplifies the feminine side of most binaries, yet she is also able to access the realm of the opposing elements. She hears the voice of both white and black, and male and female ancestors. While she is the nucleus of the community, most of her endeavors are accomplished alone–she alone possesses the healing and conjuring powers that protect and maintain the community. She feels undoubtedly at home in the natural, rural setting of the island of Willow Springs but she does not feel out of place in the urban setting of Manhattan. Cocoa also navigates between the two confronting sets of binary elements. Her mobility is most symbolically made visible in her peripatetic movement between the two islands–Manhattan and Willow Springs. Conversely, the novel confines George to the oppressive, masculine side of all these oppositions, including the position of "white" in the black/white duality. Ultimately, the novel construes George's long term relationship with a white woman, as well as his urban, middle-class life-style, as transgressions that displace him from the positive, black side of the opposition to the negative white one. His transgressions strip him of his blackness.

George is to be read as a paradigmatic symbol of African Americans' co-optation into, and corruption by, white culture. His desire to possess and control black women, the novel insinuates, directly results from this corruption. This reductive political position suggests that sexism and patriarchy are products of white Western culture and therefore

implies that these oppressive conditions did not exist within black culture prior to the cross-cultural contact initiated by the slave trade. The novel further grounds gender oppression within the domain of white culture through its attempt to connect the institution of slavery and the institution of marriage–a connection emblematized by the matrimonial relationship between Sapphira and her Norwegian owner/husband. The subtle conflation of both these oppressive systems is also reductive inasmuch as it infers that only "the black male [has been] corrupted by the value system of the white world, not the black female."[15]

The allegorical dimension of George's character robs him of the complexity he deserves. If his character must be read as, or must represent, a paradigmatic symbol, it should not be the oversimplified depiction of African Americans' abandonment of their black identities to secure and embrace the benefits and pleasures of white middle-class urban culture. Rather, I want to propose a reading of George's character as symbolic of the cultural trauma suffered by the generations of African Americans who lived through the failed promises of reconstruction and of the northern migration.

While Mama Day and the other residents of Willow Springs carry the seeds of the traumas of slavery, George represents the generations of newly emancipated slaves and free-born African Americans who were "shaped by the promise of emancipation and integration into American Society rather than the experience of slavery."[16] For these free African Americans, the most imperative plan of action was to look forward rather than backwards, and to not see themselves as "victims mired in the past." Zora Neale

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[15] Virginia Fowler, *Gloria Naylor*, 103.

[16] Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma,* 45.

Hurston's attitude toward slavery demonstrates the dominant view of the emancipation generations as well as of those who came of age in the aftermath of the Great Migration:

> someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am a granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made an American out of a potential slave said "On the line!" The Reconstruction said "Get set!"; and the generation before me said "Go!" I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I paid through my ancestors for it." (Hurston quoted in Eyerman, 89).

Hurston's approach to the past is "forward-looking and progressive"; her "past is filtered through a narrative that is evolutionary as well as progressive, it is a past that points to the future, rather than to itself" (Eyerman 89-90). In light of this political positioning, George's determination to live in the present–"Only the present has potential, *sir*"–and his disconnection with the past that Cocoa, her family, and her birthplace represent take on a new meaning.

The South, for those who chose to leave it after Emancipation, became a land imbued with threats of subordination and emasculation, and with the starker threat of violence always hanging in the air like a noose. It soon became associated with undesirable feelings, emotions, and memories, negatively portrayed as a "site of violence," or as representing a "legacy of confinement" (Eyerman 156). It is quite plausible that George's ambivalence toward the landscape of Willow Springs stems from this cultural legacy rather than from an ostensible loss of racial identity. In fact, George's connection to his own land–the urban island of Manhattan–is quite strong. His connection to a different land, I propose, signals the scarring inflicted by a different trauma.

Like Mama Day, George knows "every crook and bend" of the land he inhabits. Mama Day forages the woods in search of herbs and barks to heal the members of her

community; she listens to the voices that whisper to her as she agilely moves amongst the bodies of old trees, and the spirits of old souls. George's knowledge of his territory also brings healing–he too listens to the voices. He explains to Cocoa that her "cloistered arrogance" about the city prevents her from looking beyond the busy sidewalks of Manhattan; "New York wasn't on those Manhattan sidewalks, just the New Yorkers." The land and its people, which Cocoa carelessly dismisses as too fast and fierce, should be explored, respected, listened to. George tells her that:

> to live *in* New York you'd have to know about the florist on Jamaica Avenue who carried yellow roses even though they didn't move well, but it was his dead wife's favorite color. The candy store in Harlem that wouldn't sell cigarettes to twelve-year-olds without notes from their mothers. That they killed live chickens below Houston, prayed to Santa Barbara by the East River, and in Bensonhurst girls were still virgins when they married. Your crowd would never know about the sweetness that bit at the back of your throat from the baklava at those dark bakeries in Astoria or from walking past a synagogue on Fort Washington Avenue and hearing a cantor sing." (61)

George will spend months teaching Cocoa to explore and appreciate New York. He even takes her beyond the boundaries of the island to the "godforsaken reaches of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens" (99). Through these excursions, she will soon discover "how small and cramped [her] life had been." Looking at the Island of Manhattan from the north Bronx, she contemplates her living space: "I actually lived on this island–somewhere down there on Ninety-sixth Street, among all the clutter of those buildings looking as if any minute they would push themselves into the river. I had told Mama Day I knew New York–God what a fool I had been" (98).

Cocoa refers here to the island of Manhattan–not to the her native island–but we must read the passage as also referring to her "cramped life" in Willow Springs, especially considering that Mama Day occupies her mind as she contemplates the "island" from its peripheries. In fact, her cramped, sheltered life on Willow Springs

makes her ill-prepared for the cultural diversity she encounters in New York. George considers her "one of the youngest–and most evenhanded–bigots [he] had ever met" (62). He is exasperated by Cocoa's compulsion to refer to everyone as edible items. He wants to know why: "You called Herman Badillo a taco. Number one, it's ignorant because tacos aren't from Puerto Rico, and number two, your whole litany has turned the people in this city into material for a garbage disposal" (62). Cocoa admits that the multitude and diversity of people in the city scare her. Reducing people to consumable goods is her "way of coming to terms with never knowing what to expect from anything or anybody" (63). The weekly reconnaissance missions on which George takes Cocoa heal the fears and insecurities that manifested themselves in the form of racism and bigotry.

George will succeed in taming Cocoa's fears of his own island, but will fail to domesticate Cocoa's–the wild and unreal Willow Springs. The personal and cultural trauma that the land reawakens in him, as well as the force of Willow Springs' repetitive traumas, which he inherits the moment he marries Cocoa, will prove fatally strong and resilient. Ultimately, the novel suggests, George's failure to connect with Mama Day and with the matriarchal world of Willow Springs threatens to reinstate the Eurocentric, patriarchal power established by Bascombe Wade five generations prior. His patriarchal attitude interferes with his acceptance of black female power. The most revealing scene testifying to his inability to let go of his need to control in order to embrace the fluid and mysterious feminine realm of Willow Springs is undoubtedly the climactic quest on which Mama Day sends him. Cocoa, who has been poisoned by Ruby, cannot be saved by George's "simplistic reliance on empirical facts."[17] The conjuring powers used by

[17]Meisenhelder, 121. It is important to highlight that Ruby, a conjure woman of sorts who utilizes her powers to destroy rather than heal life, poisons Cocoa out of jealousy. Ruby is one of many characters in

Ruby are part of the supernatural world that George cannot bring himself to believe. Desperate to save his dying wife, he resolves to listen to Mama Day's "way." After hearing her directives–to go to the chicken coop, "search good in the back of [the red hen's] nest," and "come straight back here with whatever you find"—he shouts in anger and desperation "You're a crazy old woman!" (296). For George, the "old woman" is "talking in a lot of metaphors," and her request is nothing but "mumbo-jumbo" (294-5).

Throughout the novel, chickens and the eggs they produce are associated with fertility. It is by observing the texture of the eggs she adds to her cake batter that Miranda predicts the failure of Bernice's efforts to get pregnant (44). Similarly, the secret, magical ritual that Mama Day performs to help Bernice conceive a child, through which she "draws" Bernice's egg in and "holds it tight," revolves around the eggs provided by the chickens she has raised at the "other place" specifically for this purpose (140). The chicken coop functions as a metaphorical uterus–a space where the miracle of life takes place, where the eggs are conceived, nested, and transformed into life. George's reaction upon entering this female space, which he fears (earlier in the novel we are told that he is "a little afraid of live chickens" (*MD* 221)), will determine whether the peaceful coexistence of male and female powers is possible. Mama Day sends George on his mission with "Bascombe Wade's receipt for the purchase of Sapphira and John-Paul's walking stick carved with water lilies, both emblems of male failure to be everything for

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the novel who suffer from the legacy of destructive sexual relationships between black men and women. Her failing relationship with Junior Lee prompts her to suspect his interest in other women. Ruby is already believed to have killed her first husband, to have driven one woman crazy (Frances), and murdered another (May Ellen), all out of jealousy.

women, symbols of their futile hopes 'that the work of their hands could wipe away all that had gone before' (285)."[18]

Mama Day needs George to return with only his hands, so that he can clasp them into hers, bridging his masculine world with the feminine world of Willow Springs, establishing a peaceful and respectful bond between the sexes, between male and female powers. By returning with only his hands, George would have understood that he had to leave behind the cane and the ledger, both "symbols of male failure to possess women." But "subconsciously afraid of what chickens represent," . . . he instead transforms the walking stick "into a phallic instrument of violence against the Feminine that he can neither understand nor control"[19]:

> the hen flew up, her claws sank into my shoulder blades, cutting my shirt into blood strips as her weight carried her sunken claws ripping down through my back. I tried grabbing her from behind–my right hand, my left hand. Both hands attacked with her beak and spurting fresh blood. In desperation I threw her off. And when the hen came at me this time, I took up the walking cane and smashed her in the skull. I brought it down again and again. I went through that coop like a madman, slamming the cane into feathery bodies, wooden posts, straw nests–it was all the same. (300-1)

He will not bring Miranda his "gouged and bleeding hands" (300). His weak heart will succumb to the violence of the encounter and he will die. He will make it back to Cocoa's bedside before dying, and as his "bleeding hand slid gently down [Cooca's] arm, there was total peace" (302).

The opposition between the mystical world of females and the pragmatic world of males finds no resolution here. George has failed to relinquish his power into the hands of Mama Day and he pays the price with his life. Fowler remarks that "not only are hands

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[18] Susan Meisenhelder "The Whole Picture in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*," 121.

[19] Ibid.

the symbol of our connection to both the earth and the divine, but they are the symbol of our need for connection to each other" (120). Indeed, our hands are a *bridge*–but even the sturdiest bridges are sometimes torn down or destroyed and need to be rebuilt, like the bridge linking Willow Springs to the mainland. The collapsing and rebuilding of the island's only bridge underscores the novel's focal concerns with mending, joining, and connecting the members of the black diaspora dispersed by the ravages of the slave trade. Yet (re)building bridges takes time, collaboration, and effort. While the community's laboriously slow and methodical process of putting the bridge back up after the storm drives George out of his mind, Mama Day's urgency in having George "join hands" with the women of the community on his first visit to Willow Springs also displays a certain level of impatience. If there is to be peace between the sexes, it should arise from a compromise. Yet Mama Day needs George to save Cocoa *her* way, without compromise.

Despite *Mama Day*'s emphasis on joining hands, on bridging the broken pieces of African American communities, identities, and cultures, the novel's rigid binary structure, and its reliance on oversimplified dualities undercut its most honorable intentions. George could only collapse under the weight of Naylor's thematic project–he alone could not redress the imbalances of power instigated by the white supremacy and patriarchy of men like Bascombe Wade. Indeed, George's death restores peace to the female order of Willow Springs by preventing the reinstatement of patriarchal oppression. But it doesn't restore "peace" between the sexes; it fails to heal the battered relationships between black men and black women. Ultimately, the cycle of trauma continues to ravage the lives of Willow Springs' inhabitants. As the voices emanating

from the landscape, whispering from the "ginger vines on the tombstone" down by Chevy's Pass had predicted, another man dies of a broken heart (207).

Through the process of repetition at work in *Mama Day*, and through the voices whispered by the landscape and carried by the wind, the author communicates the presence of trauma. While reading the text, the reader faces, repeatedly, the dulling, desperate, rhythmic pain of Ophelia, the "woman who sat in the porch rocker, twisting, twisting on pieces of thread," an aural image that is repeated throughout the novel. The sound of trauma echoes through the soft rocking of the chair, swayed by the gentle breeze of the Sound, "its rounded slats creaking relentlessly against the wooden planks." It echoes through the barely audible words carried by the same breeze that rocks Ophelia's chair, "*you'll break his heart*," over and over (224). And on the other side of the island, through the east woods all the way to Chevy's Pass, it is Bascombe Wade's pain that echoes through the landscape. "When the wind is right in the trees, [we] can hear him calling and calling the name that nobody knows" (206).

Sapphira's repetitive haunting is also carried by the wind. But the soft breeze of The Sound cannot contain, bear, or transmit the horrors of the brutal kidnapping from land and family, the unspeakable reality of the Middle Passage, the destructive humiliation of enslavement, all of which the African-born Sapphira was avenging when she broke Bascombe Wade's heart. Sapphira haunts the island, repetitively, in the form of a hurricane that rips through Willow Springs every sixty years or so. The storm,

> starts on the shores of Africa, a simple breeze among the palms and cassavas, before it's carried off, tied up with thousands like it, on a strong wave heading due west. A world of water, heaving and tolling, weeks of water, and all them breezes die but one . . . A roar goes up and it starts to spin: moving counterclockwise against the march of time, it rips through the sugar cane in Jamaica, stripping juices from their heart, shedding red buds from royal poincianas as it spins up in the heat.

> Over the broken sugar cane fields–hot rains fall. But it's spinning wider, spinning higher, groaning as it bounces off the curve of the earth to head north . . . It hits the southeast corner of the bluff, raising a fist of water to smash into them high rocks. It screams through Chevy's Pass . . . the tombstone of Bascombe Wade trembles but holds. The rest is destruction. (249-50)

Sapphira's violent resistance to being owned, as a slave and as a wife, engendered a cycle of traumatic reoccurrences that will not end until the traumas she represents and embodies–traumas that could not have been known "in the first instance of [their] occurrence"–are finally faced and interpreted.

Despite five generations of repeated traumas, Miranda and the other descendants of Sapphira and Bascombe Wade still ignore her name. Discovering the name of the woman who is responsible for transmitting the pain down the genealogical line would symbolically equate to *naming* the trauma all her descendants suffer from. Once named, or linguistically defined, the traumas are freed from the realm of the unspeakable and stop resisting integration. Miranda understands the importance of *naming* Sapphira. After finding a black leather ledger in the attic of her father's house, she struggles to read on its molded pages the secrets that the faded ink refuses to yield:

> *Sold to Mister Bascombe Wade of Willow Springs, one negress answering to the name Sa* . . . Water damage done removed the remainder of that line . . . She's staring at the name and trying to guess. Sarah, Sabrina, Sally, Sadie, Sadonna – what? A loss she can't describe sweeps over her –a missing key to an unknown door somewhere in that house. The door to help Baby Girl. She thinks. Samantha, Sarena, Salinda –them old-fashioned names. Sandra Bell? Sapphron? She'd once met a woman long ago called Saville. She runs them through over and over until her head aches. (280) [emphasis in original].

Only once her name is known will the traumas be interpreted and possibly healed. At least the traumas of black women, that is. The narratives seems to suggest that the traumas suffered by Bascombe Wade, John-Paul, and George, while they also result from slavery, are somewhat punitive. While black women in then novel have undeniably been

victimized by slavery and its legacies, John-Paul and George, on the other hand, have been assimilated under a different category–that of perpetrators of patriarchal oppression. They have engineered their own suffering by their need to control the fate of their women, by refusing to let the women they love go with peace (285).

The novel's conflation of slavery and patriarchy does underline important connections between these two systems of oppression. Unfortunately, the author's efforts to highlight their similarities also result in dissolving their equally important differences. If slavery and patriarchy are interchangeable then, by extension, so are husbands and masters and, ultimately, black men and white men. Naylor does not allow George to inherit the traumas that black men suffered as slaves. Rather, she burdens him with the punitive traumas of a Norwegian slave owner named Bascombe Wade.

The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World

The figures in Susan-Lori Parks's 1995 play *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, like those in Naylor's novel, must *come to know* the trauma suffered by their people in order to stop the repetitive haunting. The story revolves around a single event–the ghostly reappearance of BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON, who has come to visit his wife, BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK, the only living figure in the play. After having repeatedly died, BLACK MAN returns seeking a proper burial which, the story suggests, only his wife can arrange and perform. First, she must come to terms with her husband's death, believe his otherworldly return and, finally, document the stories of his lives and deaths. Only then will the ghost of The Last Black Man–named BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON – be put to rest.

The story of BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON operates on two superimposed levels. Initially, the play recounts the story of a wife coming to terms with her husband's death

and the process by which she prepares his funeral rites. But The Last Black Man also represents the numerous black men who have died at the hands of white racist oppression in the New World, in the present as well as in the past. "The death of *every* black man in the past inhabits the death of each black man in the present in the sense that history is lived as a present."[20] The figure VOICE ON THUH TEE V tells us that "the absolutely last living Negro man in the whole entire known world– is dead." "Born a slave," the voice continues, "taught himself the rudiments of education to become a spearhead in the Civil Rights Movement. He was 38 years old" (110). Here the history of The Last Black Man is stretched across centuries– he is born a slave and he dies in the present. QUEEN-THEN-PHARAOH HATSHESPSUT confirms the extended life span of BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON, "Yesterday tuhday next summer tuhmorrow just uh moment ago in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in thuh whole entire world" (111). The date 1317 corresponds the decade which Ivan Van Sertima isolates as the beginning of African travels between Mali and North America. Sertima's findings, documented in his controversial *They Came Before Columbus,* are of course highly contested. To deny the possibility that Africans did explore the world, as did other civilizations, is to erase the black man from history, symbolically "killing" him. [21]

The distortion of the temporal scheme or, in other words, the collapsing of past into present and present into past, as well as the repetition of events and of utterances by the figures signal the presence of trauma. In fact, the traumas worked through in this play are numerous, displayed and condensed into the figure of BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON. Through his multiple deaths and incarnations, BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON has been

[20] Rayner and Elam, 451.
[21] Rayner and Elam, 453-4.

hunted down, lynched, executed by electric chair, and fallen 23 stories "from uh passin ship from space" or, in the words of Rayner and Elam Jr., has "fallen out of history."

The death by electrocution suffered by BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON points to a devastating contemporary situation, namely the pervasive racism of the American judicial and penal systems. The hunting down and lynching reflect a less recent, yet no less traumatic, reality for African Americans from the moment they were captured from their own land to well into the 1930s when the lynching of black men was still practiced in America. The vivid memories of his lynching still haunt BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: first they "Chase-ted me outa thuh trees now they tree me," he recalls (114). The scars of this trauma appear in the form of a branch, wrapped around his throat like a necklace, which he drags around and brings back home with him. So thoroughly part of the black man's history–here pointedly reduced "Histree" (121)–lynching has provoked stunning biological modifications in plants as well as in humans. Black bones and branches become one, sharing a similar genetic makeup. When whites on the trail of the escaped BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON find what they first believe to be a "small sliver of uh tree branch," they soon discover that the tree branch was instead/also a "fossilized bone fragment." Indeed, PRUNES AND PRISMS reiterates the strange phenomenon, "Uh small sliver of uh treed branch growed from-tuh uh bone" (120).

BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON, then, represents the accumulation of traumas, as well as the accumulation of all of the black men who were victims of these traumatic occurrences. The notion of accumulation is important to Parks. It forms the basis of her "Rep & Rev" (Repetition and Revision) narrative technique, which she defines as "a structure [that] creates a drama of accumulation." The repetition and revision of events,

traumas, as well as utterances in Parks's play rest on principles of jazz, where a forward progression is interrupted by a constant reincorporation of the previous lines. Instead of moving from A →B, the progression of the music, or in this case of the play, follows a A→A→A→B→A motion ("Elements of Style" 9). The past becomes part of the equation of forward movement, becoming a formative element–a haunting, if you will–of the present and future. The climax in a play constructed with this technique consists of the "accumulated weight of repetition–a residue that, like city dust, stays with us" ("Elements" 10).

All of the traumas endured by BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON produce one overarching symptom–the loss of identity, a symptom characteristic of traumas suffered collectively. Eyerman explains that "as opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion" (2). Parks's concern with the loss of identity as a result of white oppression is apparent in her use of African American cultural stereotypes in the naming of her figures. BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON, BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK, LOTS OF GREASE AND LOTS OF PORK, YES AND GREENS BLACK-EYED PEAS CORNBREAD–all reflect the process by which the dominant culture has reconstructed African American dismembered identities with fixed, deleterious symbols. These dismembered black identities need to be *re-membered.* The funeral rites taking place in this play aim to accomplish just that. The figures are gathered so as to remember BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: they seek to help him re-

member his personal identity–literally putting the pieces back together. As well, they are gathered to insure that, after crossing over, he is remembered, not forgotten.

"This does not belong tuh me," BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON assures us when contemplating the watermelon he is holding. "Somebody planted this on me. On me in my hands" (105). He makes an inventory of all of his body parts, assessing what belongs to him. He "kin tell whats mines by whats gots my looks," he explains (106). But he is persuaded that the melon isn't his–it does not respond to his call, as do his other parts, and it simply "Don't look like me" (107). The watermelon, he contends, is an artificial part of his body, one which has been planted there by an Other.

Only if his body parts are (re)connected can BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON be remembered after his death. Just before the final chorus, he pleads with his wife to miss him and remember him, now that "My hands are on my wrists. Arms on elbows . . . Toes curl up not down. My feets-now clean. Still got all my teeth. Re-member me" (128). The history of oppression that has engendered the extinction of black men in the play has scarred BLACK MAN at the level of the body–by dis(re)membering his body into pieces. Even though not all black men have experienced the horrific traumas of lynching and execution, the story suggests, they are nonetheless physically injured by the resulting loss of identity.

Putting the pieces back together is one way in which BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON will be re-membered. The other is by officially recording the historical process by which black men became extinct. Many of the spirit figures attending the funeral rites adamantly insist that BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON lives and deaths be documented. QUEEN-THEN-PHARAOH HATSHESPUT knows about the dangers of being

erased from history; her jealous stepson and nephew, resentful of her power, "destroyed most of the temples, shrines, and monuments bearing her image and her name."[22] The consequences of such an erasure are indeed traumatic, as Rayner and Elam demonstrate:

> the effect of excluding written stories in a writing culture is for that culture to be haunted by an unsymbolized loss: to act out and to repeat, like a cultural version of the hysteric of the melancholic of Freud's day, an absence without a name, an identification without an object. The issue is less that the origin or truth of African American history can be recovered than that to hold articulation in suspense is to remain haunted by the ghosts of the past without ever recognizing and honoring the force of their presence and, more importantly, laying them ceremoniously to rest. (457)

The spirit figures advise BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK to "write that down" and "hide it under uh rock." Ultimately, the traumatic history should be safeguarded by the landscape, until those willing to search for it uncover it, or until inquisitive and attentive descendants "bump into it." This recommendation reveals a genuine concern for the safety of these precious historical records–they must be hidden. Unlike the landscape in *Mama Day*, the rock here would not willingly tell the story it has been mandated to protect. It would keep it secret, lest it be stolen.

The attending spirits will later revise their suggestion and propose that BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK "carve it out of a rock" rather than place it under a rock, indelibly inscribing history onto the landscape, for all to see and read. This recommendation does not take into consideration the fluidity of history; the rock, immovable, can only be read from one angle, one position, its inscription never to be modified or revised, categorically providing only one version of undisputable facts. History, the play suggests, needs not only to be remembered; it needs to be owned, fixed. The characters in *Mama Day* are not concerned about the possible theft of their own

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[22] Rayner and Elam, 453.

history, perhaps because the land that protects it belongs to them–the Days and their descendants will always own the island of Willow Springs. Furthermore, Naylor's characters honor the mutable nature of history. Cocoa's initial distress over not owning a picture of George soon gives way to the wisdom of knowing that "It's a lot better this way, because you change as I change. And each time I go back over what happened, there's some new development, some forgotten corner that puts you in a slightly different light" (*MD* 310). To fix history is to force an event to repeat itself, unchanged, over again. It engenders repetition–repetition without revision.

BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON, now ready to be released from the liminal space between life and death that he has been inhabiting, instructs his wife to dig him a grave. She must make it big and mark it "so as I won't miss you" (109). The intimacy of their grieving culminates in her eventual acceptance of his death. At first, she insists on believing that her husband had come back because he "got uhway" and escaped his executioners. But she now acknowledges that "he done dieddiduh" and that the page has been turned (129). The grave she digs for him must be 6 by 6 by 6, "uh mass grave-site," BLACK MAN explains, since "There's company comin soonish" (109). And here again, the collective is superimposed over the personal. BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON is BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK'S husband, as well as all the other black women's husbands–all of whom also need to be put to rest and be re-membered. Nonetheless, the fact that these painful passing rites occur in the realm of matrimony suggests Parks's concern with the way painful legacies affect the most intimate relationships between African American people and that the scarring must be healed at the most basic unit of the collectivity–the family.

Eve's Bayou

Kasi Lemmons's 1997 film *Eve's Bayou* offers a story that also commits itself to linking the traumas of slavery to the contemporary lives of African American women and men and to representing the ways in which their relationships suffer from this legacy. As in *Mama Day*, the land on which the story takes place–this time the bayous of Louisiana–establishes the connection between now and then, between the characters and their ancestors. Furthermore, repetition, in Lemmons's movie as in Naylor's novel and Parks's play, signals the presence of cycles of trauma.

The film opens with a series of jagged, incomplete images flashing, in black and white, to the pulse of an eerie, cacophonous music. This scene, exposing Eve's father having intercourse with his mistress, will be replayed later in the movie in real-time. But its presence at the beginning of the movie, visually manipulated to suggest its occurrence in the form of a flashback, implies that the lives of the characters we are about to meet are replete with secrets and emotional injuries. The movie's first lines, narrated by the young Eve, confirm this intimation. "Memory is a selection of images, some elusive, others printed indelibly on the brain. The summer I killed my father, I was ten years old."

Eve is named after her ancestor, an African slave woman with powerful healing powers. General Jean-Paul Batiste frees and marries Eve after she saves his life by curing him of cholera. She gave him sixteen children; he gave her freedom and the land he owned–now a town named Eve's Bayou–on which her descendants, the prominent Batiste family, still live. The film depicts a period of Eve's (Jurnee Smollett) tenth year, and her relationships with her father Dr. Louis Batiste (Samuel L. Jackson), her mother Rose (Lynn Whitfield), her fourteen-year-old sister Cisely (Meagan Good), her nine-year old brother Poe (Jake Smollett), and her aunt Mozelle (Debbi Morgan).

Both Louis and Mozelle, the direct descendants of Eve, are linked to her in their choice of professions–both dispense healing to the community. Louis practices a more conventional form of healing–he is the town's charismatic doctor. Mozelle heals her clients' emotional distress through the more spiritual medium of clairvoyance and, when the situation calls for it, an occasional voodoo spell or charm.[23] Eve exposes herself to both curative professions; she sometimes accompanies her father on house calls. And, when she is permitted to, she listens in on her aunt's psychic sessions. In this clever story of coming of age, Eve faces the destructive and dangerous forces of both these worlds: the world of male power that her father represents–of financial, sexual, and patriarchal power, and the magical, mystical, occult world that Mozelle embodies.

Eve and Cisely have learned from a very young age to compete for their father's attention. The charming, successful Louis magnetizes the attention of all the women close to him. The two daughters, as well as Rose, Louis'ss wife, suspect his adulterous transgressions but choose to protect the appearance of familial bliss that their status and affluence dictate. The party scene at the beginning of the movie contains all of the thematic elements that structure the plot. The festive, carefree, appearance of the Batistes barely camouflages the signs of tragedies to come. The two daughters' battle for the father's attention–who chooses to dance with Cisely rather than Eve–suggests something more troubling than sibling rivalry. At the end of the party, Louis's drunken altercation with Mozelle's husband Harry about the dangers of drunk driving more than hints at the fatal accident that will kill Harry but spare Mozelle. Mattie Meraux's flaunted sexuality,

[23] Slavery and miscegenation haunt both the Batiste and the Day families' history. But the similarities between *Eve's Bayou* and *Mama Day* extend beyond the story of the land deeded by a white slave owner to a powerful African slave woman. Interestingly, the world of women in both texts is characterized by mysticism and magic, and is contrasted by the more masculine world of science.

frowned upon by some of the other guests at the party, is welcomed and subtly reciprocated by the handsome doctor when the two dance together–a warning of the events about to unfold. Together, these narratives carry the traumas haunting the tale–a quest for paternal attention that leads to accusations of incest, Mozelle's repetitive compulsion to marry men who die, and the fatal sexual transgressions of the father.

Upset that her father chose to dance with her sister rather than with her, Eve runs out of the party and seeks refuge in the carriage house, where she falls asleep. She is awakened by the sounds of lovemaking. She opens her eyes and witnesses her father having sex with Mattie Meraux. Shocked by what she sees, she screams and is then overtaken by an anxiety attack. Her father goes to her and comforts her. "Do you love mamma," she asks? He reassures her that he does "Your mother is the most beautiful woman. Your mother is perfect." [24] She later tells her sister what happened in the carriage house. "Daddy wouldn't touch that cow!" Cisely vociferously responds. "That's a lie."

In many ways, Bruce Kawin argues, "habit protects us from awareness or sensation, anxiety or pain." Repetition sometimes works to "remove[s] the emotional content from a mental experience."[25] Until then, Louis's sexual trespassing, although traumatizing, anaesthetized the members of the family–everyone knows but, lulled by its rhythmic repetitiveness, accepts it. Eve's witnessing of her father's adulterous behaviour, however, has prompted the anaesthetic to wear off; the family must now face the reality, as well as the pain and consequences it engenders. Louis's repetitive cheating produces

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[24] The tone of the actor here is ambiguous, suggesting to the viewer that the wife's "perfectness" could be the cause for Louis's adulterous trespasses.

[25] Bruce F.Kawin, *Telling it Again and Again,* 22.

an anaesthetizing effect on his own pain as well. He explains to his sister that in reality he is nothing but an ordinary black man, a small-town doctor who "pushes pills to the elderly." But the women with whom he has extramarital affairs think he is a hero. The women allow him to build and maintain a world in which his manhood is unthreatened by the reality of his existence, and even perhaps by his strong and beautiful wife.

Ultimately, Louis's unfaithfulness coincides with Patterson's description of the destructive role of progenitor that black men have carried forth from slavery. One of the most pernicious consequences of slavery, according to Orlando Patterson, manifests itself in the form of severely damaged relationships between black women and black men. Much of Afro-American men's behavior, according to Patterson, carries the devastating legacies of slavery in particular ways: "we find throughout the decades of the rural South, and throughout the underclass today, the vicious desire to impregnate and abandon women, as if Afro-American men were unable to shake off the one gender role of value (to the master) thrust upon them during slavery, that of progenitors" (51). He contends that "[p]erhaps the most important group-specific problem of Afro-Americans is the fact that the roles of father and husband are very weakly institutionalized, possibly the worst heritage of the slave past."[26] Ultimately, some black men and women continue to repeat the destructive behaviors that were forced upon them during slavery.

Mr. Garner, the owner of Sweet Home, believed his slaves were men, "treating them like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching what they wanted to know. And he didn't stud his boys . . . or rented their sex out on other farms" (140). But the man who replaced him, Schoolteacher, "broke into children what Garner had raised into men" (220).

[26] "This is not to say," Patterson insists, "that Afro-Americans do not value or idealize marriage and parenting; as I already pointed out, they do. But to repeat what was said then, idealizing something does not mean that one has the means or commitment to achieve it" (56).

Garner's naming of his slaves "men" couldn't battle the crushing force of slavery determined to deny black men that very label. "One step off [Sweet Home's] ground and they were trespassers among the human race. Watchdogs without teeth; steer bulls without horns; gelded workhorses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke" (126). If Schoolteacher, who believed blacks to be animals, was right and Garner was wrong, it explained how Paul D "had become a rag doll –picked up and put back down anywhere any time by a girl young enough to be his daughter. Fucking her when he was convinced he didn't want to." How could it be that a man like him–a man who could "be still for six hours in a dry well while night dropped; fight raccoons with his hands and win; watch another man, whom he loved better than his brothers, roast without a tear just so the roasters would know what a man was like;" a man who had walked from Georgia to Delaware–would eventually make it to Ohio only to discover that he was unable to stop himself from having sex with Sethe's daughter? (126).

Cisely's fierce response to her sister's disturbing account of the carriage house events puts into play a fatal series of events. She is, of course, jealous of her father's attention to other women. But she is also afraid that her mother, who now vehemently condemns Louis's behavior, will drive him away. She waits up for him at night–he "works" late every night now–perhaps to show him that love and comfort, not only pain and disapproval, await him at home. But one night, Rose forbids Cisely to wait up–"I will wait for your father tonight." The storm raging outside foreshadows the tempestuous fight that Rose and Louis have that night, as well as the destruction that the events about to unfold will wreak on the Batiste family. After her parents' fight, Cisely comes

downstairs and sits on her father's lap. Louis, upset and perhaps drunk, embraces his daughter and kisses her on the mouth.

For a long period after this incestuous encounter, Cisely becomes withdrawn. She shuts herself off in her room and refuses to talk to anyone. She will accept her parents' proposition to be sent away to live with her grandmother. Just before leaving, Cisely will confide in Eve who, deeply disturbed by what her sister reveals to her, makes her a promise: "I'll kill him Cicely, I'll kill him for hurting you."

"How do you kill someone with Voodoo?" Eve asks her aunt Mozelle, whose refusal to help her niece forces a determined Eve to take her request to the town's voodoo priestess.[27] And here takes place the most interesting moment of the movie. Her plan to avenge her sister will exploit two different avenues, bringing to the thematic resolution of the movie an ingenious complexity. On her way to town to bring the conjure woman her father's hair so that she can put a death spell on him, Eve runs into Matty Mereaux's husband, Lenny. She lets him know, stealthily, that neither his wife nor her father "are the lonely type." Clearly, her aunt Mozelle provides the inspiration for this double plan of attack. Eve knows about the powers of voodoo from Mozelle; she also learns from her the deadly power of perfidious love–Eve knows all about the dramatic story of Mozelle's own adulterous affair, which has ended in murder.

She later finds herself helpless to stop the plans she had put in motion. Remorseful for her actions and fearing for her father's life, she runs to the neighborhood bar where she knows she'll find her father and Matty. She begs him to come home. But Lenny also intends to find them and to put an end to his wife's unfaithfulness. He confronts Louis

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[27] I agree with Mia Mask who argues that this underwritten character, played by actress Diahann Carroll, "stands out like a sore thumb," and "amounts to little more than caricature" (26).

and warns him to never speak to his wife again–but Louis defies him. In a scene that echoes the end of Mozelle's tragic love affair, Lenny pulls out a gun and shoots Louis.

Eve partially witnesses the traumatic scene. Her father, to protect her from getting shot, pushes her away from him but toward the train tracks, at the moment when a train is coming. Eve rolls over the tracks and avoids being hit by the train. But she can only capture fragments of her father's murder as the train rushes by–catching glimpses of the drama only by intervals, in the gaps between the train cars. The scene is in black and white, as are all the other scenes in the movie involving flashbacks or traumatic memories, suggesting that Eve will be haunted by it (over and over again).

Louis, like George before him, must die for the trespasses he has committed against the women in his life. Unlike George, Louis has remained on the land of his ancestors. Nonetheless, he has broken the connection between himself and the mystical world of females–here represented by his sister Mozelle. The relationship between Louis and Mozelle echoes that of George and Mama Day. Like George who thinks that Mama Day is "a crazy old woman" (296), Louis considers his sister a fraud. He makes it clear that he only tolerates her eccentric lifestyle because she is his sister. Both male characters are much more comfortable in the more pragmatic world of men.

Louis uses his membership in the patriarchal world to exploit women and the pleasures–physical and emotional–that they can offer him. His behavior is symptomatic of what Orlando Patterson identifies as the pernicious residue of slavery. He is the paradigmatic model of black men described by Patterson who find themselves unable to escape the gender roles assigned to them by their masters during centuries of enslavement, that of progenitor.

Many of the traumatic experiences of black men under slavery were directly related to their inability to choose whom to love, and to then care for and protect them. Paul D knew better than to love anything other than "Grass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers, beetles, a kingdom of ants. Anything bigger wouldn't do. A woman, a child, a brother –a big love like that could split you wide open" (162). And it did split Halle wide open when he was forced to witness, but unable to stop, Schoolteacher's nephew from stealing Sethe's milk. He was next found sitting by the churn, greased up with butter, and "flat-eyed as a fish" (224). Sixo too went mad when his Thirty-Mile woman had to get on the underground railroad without him but "with his blossoming seed" (229). He laughs hysterically as the white men lynch him, choosing the pain of being burned alive over the even more unbearable pain of living without his woman and the child she was carrying.

After his death, Eve goes through her dead father's things and discovers a letter he wrote to Mozelle. It is here that we find out what really happened between Louis and his daughter on the night of the storm. Cisely, rather than Louis, instigated the incestuous encounter. In the letter, Louis admits to adoring his older daughter and to allowing her to adore him; "it was a sweet indulgence." But he denies Mozelle's accusations. "How could you accuse me," he writes to his sister, of "deliberately abusing my most beloved child?" Yet he takes responsibility for the way he handled his daughter's sexual advances–"This is where I blame myself. I was so startled," he explains, "that I hit her and she fell to the floor." "Nothing in her behavior," he assures her, "prepared me for what happened on the night of the storm."

Louis is incapable of linking his daughter's desperate act to his own actions; it is no wonder then that he fails to predict her behavior. But there are many ways in which to establish a cause and effect relationship between Cisely's behavior, as well as Eve's plan to avenge her sister, and their father's unfaithful behavior. In fact, Cisely's sexual advances toward her father, and Eve's resolve to kill him, are indeed *repetitions* of the trauma their father's behavior has been causing them, a hypothesis that will gain clarity in the light of Freud's work on traumatic repetitions. In "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Freud discusses the behavior of a young child who repeatedly played at throwing away one of his toys, only to fetch it right back. Each throwing and fetching action of the child is accompanied by the sounds "gone" and "there." The game, Freud argues, recreated the child's feelings towards the leaving and returning of his mother. The leaving of the mother is an unpleasurable event for the child, one that he recreates by throwing away his toy. Yet in the throwing away of the object, the child exercises some *agency.* Freud explains that "children repeat unpleasurable experiences for the additional reason that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively" (307).

Obviously, Eve's and Cisely's reaction to their father's behavior can hardly be qualified as "games." Yet the "leaving" of the father as it operates in the movie–his leaving the party to have sex with Matty, his leaving every evening to "see patients," his leaving every Sunday to do "house calls," etc.–is much more traumatic for the two girls than the "leaving" of the mother for the young son in Freud's story. Eve's re-experiencing of the carriage house event as a flashback testifies to its injurious effect. So does the anxiety attack it provoked at the moment of witnessing. Cisely's violent

reaction upon hearing of it from her sister, and her desperate attempts to receive attention from her father also reveal serious emotional damage.

The painful feelings of rejection and abandonment that the girls had been experiencing as a direct result of their father's constant "leavings" were, until the carriage house incident, kept in check by the family's efforts to turn a blind eye to Louis's unfaithfulness. But Eve's witnessing of her father's extramarital affair triggered the neurosis. When the instinct to repress a painful memory is challenged by a triggering event, the confrontation between the two impulses often results in a compulsion to repeat: "the patient repeats instead of remembering, and repeats under the conditions of resistance."[28] As an example of this behavior, Freud documents that rather than telling the therapist about the conditions of his or her trauma, the patient will often "act it out," either by attempting to provoke the analyst into abandoning her, or into scorning and abusing her, therefore *repeating* the conditions of the trauma.

The (double) neuroses suffered by Louis's daughters develop into completely opposite scenarios of agency–one wishes to love her father, the other wishes to kill him. Cisely interpreted her father's confused reaction to her kiss as one of rejection, once more feeling abandoned by him. Yet this time, she had *agency* in the event. Eve's engineering of Louis's death invites a similar interpretation–by killing him, she repeated, with agency, his act of abandonment one final time.

Throughout the movie, Mozelle justifies her brother's unfaithfulness as a hereditary trait that both have inherited from a family history characterized by sexual taboos–originally in the form of miscegenation. She tells Eve about her own extramarital affair, which ended in tragedy. When Mozelle's lover finally confronted her husband about

[28] Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working –Through," (151).

wanting to take her away from him, the altercation between the two men ended in the murder of her husband. Mozelle, considered a black widow by many of the town's inhabitants, has lost three husbands. She is cursed, or so the town's conjure woman proclaims.

We can only speculate on the source of the trauma that compels Mozelle to repeatedly marry men who die. If indeed the repetition of a traumatic occurrence indicates a resistance to remembering, we can safely assume that Mozelle is repressing a trauma. It is unlikely that she is repressing the death of her first husband, and that this repression leads her to repeat that which traumatized her in the first place, because Mozelle remembers quite clearly the details concerning her husband's death. In fact, she recalls these details voluntarily to "replay" the scene for Eve. Voluntary memory of an occurrence implies its integration and assimilation. What, then, is traumatizing Mozelle?

Because Mozelle is so clearly linked to Eve Batiste, the powerful African healer, we must understand her trauma as originating with her ancestor. Like the members of the Day family who continue to suffer the repetitive loss of peace endured by their original ancestor Sapphira, Mozelle continues to bear the unresolved burdens of the past.

Toni Morrison's concept of rememory represents well these characters' experiences. Sethe explains the phenomenon as a kind of repetition that happens when you "bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else." It is a "a mental-spatial structure" of a pain that remains long after it has been suffered, at the very place where it has been suffered, so that "if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again." This "magical anamnesis" describes the kinds of repetitions at work in both Naylor's and Lemmons'ss narratives particularly well, inasmuch as it emphasizes

the ways in which the very land becomes imbued with the pain suffered on it and transmits it to its inhabitants. [29] *The very title of the film underscores the importance Lemmons places on land and location. In both these authors' narratives, the characters have chosen to remain on the land on which the trauma of their ancestors was suffered–a land which the black descendants now own. These stories clearly emphasize the connection between land and lineage.*

Indeed, both Mozelle and Louis, direct descendants of Eve Batiste, lay claim to the land, and both "bump" into the family's traumatic history. Louis carries the heritage that black men acquired under slavery, which manifests itself in the urge to impregnate women–an urge disconnected from the adjacent roles of husband and father. Mozelle's trauma echoes the African healer's, who married the man who owned her. Like Sapphira in *Mama Day*, Eve became the permanent mate of her master, bearing his children, therefore forcing the roles of slave and wife/mother toward a somewhat noxious relationship. As in Naylor's novel, the institutions of slavery and matrimony are conflated in a way that makes the positions of women within these relationships very ambiguous, perhaps even traumatizing. It is no wonder that the traumatic repetition invading Mozelle's life takes form within the realm of matrimony, or occurs at the level of conjugal relationships. But Lemmons's attempt at highlighting the similarities between patriarchy and slavery through the institution of marriage has more in common with Parks's than with Naylor's. The traumas of black men here do not become sucked into the vacuum of white patriarchal crimes. The traumatic legacy from which Louis suffers is one of black victimization under the system of slavery. And unlike George's trauma,

[29] Toni Morrison's *Beloved,* 36; Ashraf Rushdy. *Remembering Generations,* 6; *Beloved,* 36; Rushy, 6.

which can be traced back to Bascombe Wade, Louis's can be traced back to Eve, not to General Jean-Paul Batiste.

The traumatic repetitions afflicting Mozelle's life once again threaten to manifest themselves when she falls in love again. Encouraged by her dead brother, who has been visiting her in her dreams, she considers wedding Julian GrayRaven. "Don't look back," Louis advises Mozelle. But Louis's advice to move forward without looking backward can only perpetuate the traumatic cycles. It is only by looking backwards, back to Eve and General Jean-Paul Batiste, that Mozelle will recover and interpret the events afflicting her with the compulsion to repeat. She must, like Mama Day, intently listen to the whispers of the land–or turn over a few rocks and see what history lies beneath. Choosing to not look back–or to continue to repress the traumatic history of her family–will inevitably lead to more traumatic hauntings.

Furthermore, Julian GrayRaven is himself traumatized. Since his wife has disappeared, he has been endlessly roaming the country in search of her. In fact, this is the reason he seeks Mozelle in the first place. He believes that her psychic powers may help him locate his wife; and she does. During a clairvoyance session with Julian Mozelle finds, through a series of jagged and disturbing visions, Julian's wife in the arms of someone else. Both these characters' emotional and psychological instability strongly suggest that marriage would perpetuate, rather than heal, the traumatic cycles of Mozelle's life. We can only guess what happens to Mozelle and Julian–the movie ends leaving this relationship unresolved.

If Mozelle's fate remains unresolved by the end of the movie, Eve's, in contrast, becomes clearer. She has begun to experience premonitory visions and to recognize them

as the occult powers that are being passed down to her. She also learns that she must respect these powers, and use them wisely. She begins to understand that voodoo only works in conjunction with other powers at work in the universe. While at the beginning of the movie Eve tells us that "The summer[she] killed [her] father, [she] was ten years old," by the end of the movie she has revised the guilty confession to "The summer my father said goodnight, I was ten years old." The revised repetition of Eve's statement has shifted her father's death from her agency to his. It is no longer *she* who killed her father; rather, it is *he* who said goodnight. She now sees that she could not have engineered her father's death through her twenty-dollar voodoo spell, nor through her conversation with Lenny about Matty and Louis. The powers she has inherited are much more complex than these impulsive, adolescent actions.

In their introduction to *Tense past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory,* Paul Antze and Michael Lambek contend that "there is nothing liberating in narrative per se." Victims of trauma will continue "to reenact their stories until they begin the work of interpretation" (xix). Eve's revised repetition between the opening and closing lines of the movie suggests that she has begun such a work of interpretation. She will hopefully avoid the fate of her aunt Mozelle who is caught in a cycle of traumatic repetitions.

The ending of Beloved *is fraught with contradictions about the possibilities of healing the traumatic past as it manifests into the present. Sethe undergoes her own experience of traumatic repetition, (re)living through a version of the event which, on its first occurrence, led her to kill her own children. Indeed, when "the four Horsemen" came in her yard, "Schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff"(148), Sethe made sure to "t[ake] and put her babies where they'd be safe" (164). She will be*

haunted by the events of that day–her 28th day of freedom–until the end of the novel when Beloved, who has returned in the flesh to confront her mother and the violent act that ended her life, finally vanishes. Sethe and Beloved are standing on the porch, hand in hand, listening to the thirty or so women of the community who have assembled in front of the house, their voices searching "for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words," when she suddenly sees it happening all over again (261). Seeing a white man in a hat coming up the road to her house triggers the traumatic recollection/reenactment. She thinks she recognizes the hat. It is Mr. Bodwin's hat, not Schoolteacher's. But what Sethe sees is that man "Guiding the mare, slowing down, his black hat wide-brimmed enough to hide his face but not his purpose. He is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing" (262). This time, however, Sethe directs her protective, murderous impulse at the enemy rather than at her children. This revised version of the original traumatic occurrence suggests that the process of healing will now begin.

But Beloved's ending is far from unequivocal. By the closing of the narrative, Beloved is pregnant. The status of the expectant ghost suggests a kind of procreative repetition that threatens the possibility for resolution, or for the healing of Sethe's haunting traumas. Even more so if we consider the context within which Beloved's child was conceived. Beloved's pregnancy puts even more weight on the unstable relationship between Sethe and Paul D, menacing the duplication, or perpetuation, of the damaged (and damaging) relationships between black men and black women that Patterson identifies as the most malignant consequence of slavery.

The endings of Naylor's, Parks's, and Lemmons's Narratives of Recovery display a similar struggle between resolution and perpetuation of traumatic repetitions. Some of the past's traumas are healed, and some continue to haunt the lives of subsequent generations. Mama Day and Eve's Bayou have laid the weight of healing the past into the hands of the next generation, giving us hope that Cocoa and Eve, endowed with youth, hope, and strength, may succeed where their mentors have failed. And BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK has finally laid BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON, and all of the traumas he embodies, to rest.

But Mozelle cannot pass down to her nieces what she has not learned herself. The same is true for Mama Day who, despite her efforts to *know* Sapphira, is incapable of remembering her name. The fact that the communal voice narrating much of the story freely articulates Sapphira's name suggests that the conjure woman's name is known, but can't be recalled by her direct descendants. Indeed, Sapphira doesn't live in "the part of [their] memory [they] can use to form words" simply because the traumas that she represents and that she has been transmitting across generations have not yet been integrated into "the part of the brain" that remembers assimilated events. Finally, it may seem like Parks's characters have successfully put to rest The Last Black Man, yet they must still hide the history of pain under a rock, or carve it in stone, to protect it against theft and tampering. The history of pain remains fixed, doomed to repeat itself unchanged.

The very different manifestations of traumatic repetitions in Naylor's, Parks's, and Lemmons's texts prompt the question as to whether "repetition compulsion [is] another

form of enslavement or a means of liberation? Or is it completely other?"[30] While this chapter seeks to answer this question, it fails to provide a definite answer. At times, traumatic repetition retraumatizes the lives of some characters–Peace, Ophelia, George, Mozelle. At others, it offers the hope for healing–it guides Eve towards discovering the secrets of her inherited healing powers; it pushes Abigail to uncover Sapphira's name; it insures that the history of The Last Black Man is recorded and that he is re-membered. And sometimes, it acts as an anaesthetic, if only temporarily—as it does for Louis's pain and his family's. What the various traumatic repetitions have in common in these texts, however, is that they signal the presence of trauma.

[30] Bruce Simon, "Traumatic Repetition: Gayl Jones's *Corregidora.*"

CHAPTER 5
DANGEROUS INTIMACIES: SEXUALITY, SPIRITS AND TRAUMA IN *VOODOO DREAMS*, *MIDDLE PASSAGE*, AND *OXHERDING TALE*

This chapter explores, through a psychoanalytical lens, the ways in which trauma, sexuality, and contact with the spirits of the dead propel time in a recurring circular motion, enabling the characters of *Voodoo Dreams, Oxherding Tale,* and *Middle Passage* to recover (from) the ravages of history. Indeed, "the *passing* of time is intrinsically traumatic" even, or perhaps especially, when the past has the potential, each time it is recalled, to cause injury. When we speak of the past, "we eradicate our lived experiences by forgetting them, turning discrete experiences laden with love and hate, turmoil and serene beauty, into a globular notion–the past. The term signifies the ultimate decay of finite lived experience."[1]

The pressures in contemporary American society put on African Americans to forget the past, to get over it, to move on, can be gauged by the counter-responses they provoke.[2] Yet in forgetting the past, do African American identities risk "the *oblivion* of self destruction," the eradication of the details that make one "unique and unrepeatable"?[3] Or better yet, does the African American past risk being engulfed, absorbed, contained, or dissolved in the globular history of its white oppressors? Marie Laveau's repetitive

[1] Christopher Bollas. *Cracking Up,* 119.

[2] Every social or political movement creates a counter-movement. The counter response to the contemporary pressure for African Americans to leave the past behind manifests itself in the impulse to protect it, most visibly in such efforts as the current legal and political attempts to seek reparations for slavery.

[3] Bollas, 118.

existence, and her ability to channel her ancestors; Rutherford Calhoun's recrossing of the Middle Passage and his encounter with the all-encompassing, eternal supernatural being in the hull of the slave ship are instances that help *circulate* the traumatic events of the past, and the events of the traumatic past.

The theoretical approach that frames my reading of the Narratives of Recovery in this chapter is based on the concept of dangerous intimacy, which I borrow from Pamela Thurschwell. The interlacing of psychoanalysis, the supernatural, and sexuality embodied in the concept of dangerous intimacies creates an interdisciplinary space from which, if not to exorcise them, at least to communicate with the ghosts haunting many contemporary narratives of slavery.

'I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name'. . . 'Beloved.' He said it, but she did not go. She moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it. What he knew was that when he reached the inside part he was saying, 'Red heart. Red heart,' over and over again. Softly and then so loud it woke Denver, then Paul D himself. 'Red heart. Red heart. Red heart.' (Beloved 117)

In *Literature, Technology, and Magical Thinking, 1880*-1920, Thurschwell investigates the development of psychoanalysis within the context of late nineteenth, early twentieth-century, a period, she claims, ripe with anxieties about intimacies. Important technological advents of the period, such as the telephone and the telegraph, and the "technologically uncanny contacts" they have made possible laid the foundation for the growing popularity of the "science" of the occult, as well as the development of

psychoanalysis. Thurschwell links the immediate, disembodied transmission of thoughts enabled by new technologies with the seemingly magical transference of thought occurring in telepathy, and the psychoanalytic concern with the intricate functioning of the mind.

The dissolution of barriers between minds made possible by these technological and scientific developments spawns anxieties about intrusions, even violations, of the boundaries of one's mind and by extension, of one's body. It is not surprising, then, that in psychoanalysis the supernatural manifests itself as the erotic:

> what the supernatural and the erotic have in common is the ways in which fears, anxieties, desires–the meat and potatoes of psychoanalysis–emerge from questions of proximity and distance. Are the dead ineradicably distant/other to us? Or can they invade our very selves? what if they speak through us? What if other living minds are closer to us than we like to think; what if they too invade us? . . . *How close is too close?* (Thurschwell 119)

The concept of dangerous intimacies defines a zone of contact that allows for bodies and minds to overlap in ways that are "too close, too inextricable."[4]

This intimate overlapping of bodies and minds conjures up interesting possibilities for the reading of cross-racial, cross-gendered, and cross-generational contact at work in Rhodes's and Johnson's novels. Thurschwell's concept of dangerous intimacies raises questions about "what separates one mind from another and what separates the living from the dead" (Thurschwell 2). One century later, in a completely different geographical, social, and cultural setting, many contemporary African American writers are fascinated by these very same questions: what does separate one mind from another and the dead from the living? More specifically, what separates the white mind from the black mind? And what separates an African American still suffering from the lingering

[4] Thurschwell, 11.

trauma of slavery from his or her African ancestors or his Anglo-American oppressors? Is it possible to break down the temporal barriers that separate them? And what exactly instigates this desire to do so?

Before proceeding to a reading of these texts, let me briefly acknowledge an instance of dangerous intimacy upon which my readings will rely. I am referring to the interlacing of psychoanalysis with the occult. Both fields of inquiry concern themselves with the intricate functioning of the minds, and both gained momentum during the same period of teletechnological development. These technologies introduce an uncanny, but nonetheless seductive, dissolution of barriers between minds, one that prepares the terrain for the study of the interactions between minds, and of the effects of these instances of intimacy on bodies.

Undoubtedly, the most vocal proponent for the cross-fertilization between psychoanalysis and the occult was Freud's long-time disciple, the young Hungarian analyst named Sandor Ferenczi. Ferenczi believed that thought transference, a process akin to the telepathic practices performed by the multiplying psychics and mediums of the time, was indeed possible. He also believed that thought transference, in part because of its ability to break down the barriers between the intellectual and the emotional, could potentially become an important tool for negotiating the fraught interactions between analyst and patient.

But Freud disagreed, believing that the dangers summoned by an intimate relationship between psychoanalysis and the occult far outweighed its potential benefits. The unstable status of the occult as a want-to-be science of the mind could only result in tarnishing the reputation of psychoanalysis, which was also struggling to establish itself

as a scientifically anchored exploration of the mind.[5] The written correspondence between Freud and Ferenczi clearly shows Freud's attraction to the occult, an attraction that he nonetheless thoroughly resists for fear of the "potentially muddying incursion of occult knowledge into psychoanalysis." And while he certainly considered telepathy to be the most " 'respectable' element in the field of occultism,"[6] and engaged in stimulating discussions about it (at least privately with some of his peers), the following remark testifies to his forceful desire to eliminate, at least in the public imagination, the leakage between these two somewhat permeable fields:

> I have formed an impression in the course of the psychoanalytic treatment of patients that the activities of professional fortune-tellers conceal an opportunity for making particularly objectionable observations on thought-transference. These are insignificant and even inferior people, who immerse themselves in some sort of performance–lay out cards, study writing or lines upon the palm of the hand, or make astrological calculations–. . . and go on to prophesy their future . . . . Their convincing is unfortunately impaired by the numerous reticences to which I am compelled by the obligation of medical discretion.[7] (40)

Freud considered Ferenczi's fascination for telepathy and for its "insignificant and inferior" practitioners a flirtation with what Thurschwell describes as dangerous intimacy. Yet, as I hope to demonstrate in this paper, the juxtaposition of the supernatural and of psychoanalysis opens up intriguing possibilities for the reading of Narratives of Recovery.

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[5] For a more extensive treatment of these issues, including Freud's efforts to censor Ferenczi's attempts to create a link between the two fields of study, see Jeffrey B. Rubin's "Politics and Censorship in Psychoanalysis: Sandor Ferenczi and the Secret Community." Also, Ernest Jones's *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (vol. 3), specifically his chapter on Biology and on Occultism.

[6] Ernest Jones, 380.

[7] Sigmund Freud. "Dreams and Occultism," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. xxii. London: Hogarth Press, 1964.

Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Voodoo Dreams* (1995) clearly demonstrates a concern with questions of proximity and distance, and with the dangers, as well as the potential rewards, of dangerously intimate contact with the Other. Marie Laveau's search for her maternal ancestry hovers between genealogy and geography–or between a reconnection with her dead mother as well as with Africa, the metaphoric Mother of stolen and enslaved Africans. Marie's search for the Mother --or the (m)Other, really–displays a sophisticated exploration of the debilitating effects of disconnection–national, geographical, genealogical, racial, communal, and personal disconnections. The novel's instances of supernatural trances, spirit channeling, and transgressive sexuality seek to reestablish these severed connections. At the root of these dangerous intimacies and the contact zones they create lies an attempt to force characters to confront the Other: their estranged, ancestral African Others, as well as their contemporary American Others, a confrontation, the novel suggests, necessary to heal the traumas of the past, to mend the fissures within the African American past, and to reduce the gaps between cultures and races.

Unlike Rhodes's, Johnson's narrative depictions of the traumas of slavery in *Middle Passage* (1991) and *Oxherding Tale* (1995), because of their philosophical grounding, show more restraint in their embracing of the supernatural. In fact, the supernatural force in *Middle Passage*–an African god stolen from its temple and brought aboard the slave ship to be shipped with the rest of its human cargo–is literally kept in a cage, demonstrating the caution with which the author uses this narrative device. This apparent desire to keep the supernatural in check does not prevent Johnson's novels from confronting dangerous intimacies. The cross-racial, cross-gendered, and cross-

generational interminglings tackled by Johnson's narratives are represented at the level of the body, and manifest themselves though the flow of body fluids. Johnson represents the African slave trade's destructive and enduring consequences on the destinies of blacks and whites alike through their devastating effects on bodies–though the diseased deterioration of bodies, and the contamination of their porous boundaries. This embodiment of slavery's consequence reflects the interrelationship between bodies and minds that takes place in the aftermath of trauma; it reflects the process whereby traumatic neuroses seep into the organic.

Voodoo Dreams

Marie Laveau, the fourth daughter of a line of famous voodoo queens, was raised by her grandmère in the Louisiana bayou of Téché. From a young age, she questions her grandmother about her mother who, unbeknownst to her, died when she was four years old. Grandmère withholds from young Marie that her mother, the great Marie Laveau, died at the hands of a Christian mob protesting against the voodoo queen's performance in the town's Cathedral Square. Horrified by what they believed to be the work and manifestation of the devil, the mob violently killed the voodooienne. The old woman's fear of losing another child to the violence of white racism and religious persecution prevents her from telling her granddaughter about her mother's death. The story of Marie Laveau's death cannot be told without the revelation that the gift of voodoo is part of the family's lineage, and without alerting the young girl to the possibility–the inevitability, really–of its calling. If only she can protect the young Marie from the call of voodoo, a call that she herself received, followed, then repudiated many years ago, she may succeed in saving the young girl's life. But the more she withholds information, the more desperately Marie seeks to know.

At the age of sixteen, despite grandmère's efforts to keep voodoo at bay, its inherited powers begin to manifest themselves to the young Marie in the form of visions. Desperate to silence the call of the gods, grandmère takes Marie to New Orleans to find her a husband. Only the love of a man, or so she believes, can keep the spirits at bay. But the man grandmère chooses for Marie, the handsome curly-haired sailor named Jacques, cannot compete against the powerful John–the man who finally brings voodoo into the life of Marie Laveau, the man responsible for her Maman's death, the very man from whom grandmère has been protecting her granddaughter.

Before being shipped to the New World as a slave, John was an African prince. Captured by black tribal enemies and sold to whites into slavery, John's "memories were more horrible than simple death" (207). Trapped for more than one hundred days in the hull of a slave ship, he suffered the staggering dissolution of his royal status, of his manhood. During the Middle Passage, "the others captured had called upon innumerable gods: Ogy, Damballah, Legba, Agwe. He'd almost gone crazy from the unrelenting buzz of entreaties. Cries in the night, cries in the day, which had passed as night in the oppressive darkness. Cries expelled with the last breath of a dying body. Nothing changed. The ship had sailed on to the auction block and slavery" (207). John's traumatic experiences feed the bitterness he feels toward his white oppressors, toward his own people who captured and sold him, and toward his gods who failed to rescue him from the holds of the slave ship.

This bitterness is at the root of his obsession with transforming Marie into the great Voodoo Queen. As soon as he discovers that the women in Marie's family have been chosen by the god Damballah to keep voodoo alive in the New World, he sees in

seducing the young and vulnerable girl an opportunity to exploit the gods who betrayed him. He grooms Marie to become a great public performer, transforming, in the process, the religion she was called to protect and disseminate into a lucrative, artificial spectacle. He is the one who engineers her fatal performance in Cathedral Square, taunting both the white Christian God of his white oppressors, as well as the black gods who betrayed him. By putting Marie's life–the very "vessel" through which they manifest themselves to their African brethrens–in danger, he threatens the gods' very existence.

Not unlike many survivors of traumatic occurrences who repeatedly seek to recreate the circumstances of their trauma, John's exploitation of Marie's gift, of her status as Damballah's chosen one, allows him to transform his abandonment trauma into a dramatic ceremonial performance. Every time that Damballah chooses to "possess" Marie, or that other gods "enter" her during the theatrical ceremonies he regularly organizes, he must face, over and over, the gods' refusal to recognize his royal status, his superiority as an African prince and ultimately, as a man. John knows that Damballah chooses only women as a vehicle of his powers because, unlike men, they "birthed themselves–woman to woman–in a chain as old as creation." John is trapped in a compulsion to repeat. At every ceremony, he reenacts (so as to eventually control) his early trauma of having been abandoned, scorned, ignored by his gods.

John is addicted to the power he exercises over Marie Laveau and, by proxy, over the gods who possess her. After her death, he waits for her daughter to become of age so that he can repeat the process and continue to feed his addiction. He knows that the young Marie will, like her mother and grandmother before her, possess the gift, and that

she will be chosen by the African gods. For twelve years, he plans his seduction of yet another Marie Laveau, whom he will also groom to become a powerful performer.

Until she meets John, the young Marie's life is consumed by an insatiable desire to know her mother, whom she believes to be still alive. Knowing the young girl's longing to know her mother, John gains her complete devotion by promising to lead her to her mother: 'Like your Maman," he tells her, "I'll teach you your faith. I'll make you Queen of the Voudons'" (116-7). She believes him. She will abandon Grandmère and her husband Jacques to give herself to John. The African Prince does make of Marie the new Voodoo Queen, and he does give her the opportunity to finally meet her mother during her first voodoo ceremony, albeit in spirit form.

Before proceeding to a reading of Marie's relationship with her mother's spirit, I wish to clarify some aspects of my theoretical positioning. Clearly, the use of the supernatural in this text is grounded in African cosmology. The failure to acknowledge the connection between an African and an Afro-Atlantic heritage and the author's very specific choice of voodoo and spirit possession as the element of magic in this narrative would be to perform an ethnocentric reading of the text. Indeed, in addition to recovering (from) a discredited African American history, culture, and identity, the narratives of recovery re-appropriate still another element of African heritage, namely an African cosmology relegated by Westerners to the realm of the bizarre, the uncanny, the impossible. The following section's highlighting of the dangerous intimacies between sexuality, trauma, and spirit possession, especially in the context of the relationship between Marie, John, and Marie's dead mother, does not challenge the text's connection to African cosmology; it simply offers an alternative reading. I wish to demonstrate that

the sexually charged instances of spirit possession that Marie performs throughout the narrative correlates with the author's concern to explore the broken or damaged connections with the (m)other, as a result of slavery and of a legacy of racial and gender oppression.[8]

Marie's first channeling experience is certainly the most enthralling. She leaves her family behind her to move in with John, who begins to teach her and prepare her for her role as a voodoo priestess. He promises her that "Damballah would return her Maman if she would return to Damballah" (119). On her first ceremony, eager to please John and to finally meet her mother, she opens herself up to being possessed by the snake god Damballah, "the favored and most powerful of the spirits" (119). Once inside her, the snake takes over her body; she "*slithered down from her chair. She moved through the forests, crawled, and felt the earth tremble beneath her belly. So cool she was*" (121) [italics in original]. When she comes to, "stunned faces watched her." The crowd, thrilled by what they have just seen, throw themselves on Marie, wanting to touch their new Voodoo Queen. But Marie is overwhelmed. Feeling vulnerable, lost, she asks Damballah to send her mother to her: "Never in her life had she more needed a mother's love . . . 'I need to see her . . . have her now"(123).

Her mother answers her calls. Finally, the long-awaited reunion takes place. But rather than entering through the door of the ceremony room, as the young Marie expects,

[8] Here, as in *Mama Day* and *Eve's Bayou,* the supernatural powers that the female characters inherit have been passed down matrilineally. While it would be inviting to draw a link between matrilineage and the preservation of African cosmological traditions, Gerima's *Sankofa* and Johnson's *Middle Passage* challenge this reading by putting the task of protecting and disseminating African beliefs in the hands of males. In fact, this attribution of supernatural powers to the realm of the feminine seems to reflect the Western dichotomy between the masculine realm–a domain characterized by the more solid, pragmatic world of sciences, and the feminine realm–the wild, unruly domain characterized by the mystical world of the occult and the magical.

her mother appears, "floating above the sea of hands." She struggles to understand why her mother is in spirit form; "[n]onetheless, Marie opened her arms: "*Maman dove inside her, possessing, fitting neatly into sinews, bones, and blood.* Maman took glory where Marie couldn't. So this, Marie marvelled, is what Maman felt like" (123) [emphasis in original].

John understands exactly what has happened; he recognizes the older Marie in the younger one's body, approaches her and takes hold of her. "I've returned," Marie tells her ex-lover, "*Two minds in one body"* (123). In a dangerously intimate way, the boundaries between minds have been penetrated. The lovemaking that ensues merges these three entities in a most dangerous intimacy. The two Maries, who now share a body, will be penetrated by another. The young Marie's body becomes, at this point, nothing but the vehicle through which John and the older Marie re-experience the sexual passion they shared when she was alive, "a mother loving through her daughter" (130). Yet the young Marie is present, experiencing every physical and emotional sensation. Until, that is, John reaches orgasm and Maman flees her daughter's body. As soon as John senses that Marie is once again alone in her body, he "turned away onto his side," disappointed (125).

For a brief period, Marie's mind is overpowered by her (m)other's in an instance that makes us recall Thurschwell's earlier discussion of the anxieties spurred by telepathy and by the seemingly magical aspect of new technologies. Thurschwell writes that "[g]enealogically linked to the older concept of sympathy and the newer word empathy, telepathy is also related to love–the desire for complete sympathetic union with the mind of another" (14). Indeed, Marie initially welcomes, invites really, her (m)other's intrusion

of her body and mind, longing to finally *know* her. Yet the experience leaves her empty and ashamed, abandoned by the man she now depends on, and betrayed by the mother she desperately needs.

Prior to the possession, Marie believed that only through knowing her mother could she know herself–her mother was the missing part of her identity and, once found, she would be complete. But the possession has led Marie to define her identity *in opposition*, rather than *in addition* to her mother's. It is through their differences, made salient in the heat of the passion they share with John, that Marie comes to know herself. She is what her mother is not; her mother is what she is not:

> *Marie lay atop, shivering as they melted into one. Maman preferred to ride him. Marie tried to separate feelings. Something in Maman wanted to hurt. Maman dug her nails into his sides. She slapped at his chest. Maman played the coquette, lifting her torso. Marie preferred loving more sweetly. Maman forced him to move beneath her while her hips remained still.* (125) [italics in original]

The different emphases in this passage clearly highlight the dissimilarities between mother and daughter in a way that defines their separate identities.

Marie will not let this happen again. She understands that her (m)other's presence within the confines of her body threatens her own existence. Michael Adams describes this form of interaction between self and other as the "zero-sum game." "Although the self–'white,' 'black,' or any other color–may desire contact with the other, it may also fear the consequences of it. The self may be afraid that the encounter is a zero-sum game in which any gain of identity from the other must necessarily result in an equal, or equivalent, loss of identity from the self. That is, the self may fear losing itself." In extreme cases, Adams explains, the self fears that it may become so thoroughly intertwined with the other that it may lose the ability to recognize itself, that it may

become the other." [9] Marie's relationship with her mother is too intimate, the overlap of bodies and minds too close, too inextricable.

The relationship between Sethe and the daughter she killed eventually reaches a dangerous level where identities risk dissolving into one another and, ultimately, where one identity risks annihilating the other. Beloved, desperate to get close enough to Sethe to understand why her mother would commit such a violent act toward her, seeks to become her mother. "Dressed in Sethe's dresses, she stroked her skin with the palm of her hand. She imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way down to the walk, the way Sethe moved her hands, sighed through her nose, held her head. Sometimes coming upon them making men and women cookies or tacking scraps of cloth on Baby Suggs' old quilt, it was difficult for Denver to tell who was who" (241). But eventually, this attempt to become the other escalates into a destructive "cannibalistic" relationship, whereby Beloved hunger sucks the life right out of Sethe. "The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved's eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away become slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur" (250).

Rhodes's narrative seeks to find a middle ground between the double impulse involved in dangerous intimacies. On the one hand lies the desire to know the other; on the other lurks the dangers of being assimilated by it. Marie will learn to negotiate these tensions. She will deny her mother access to her body, but will not sever the relationship

[9] In *The Multicultural Imagination: "Race," Color, and the Unconscious*, 5-6.

with her, as her mother is a necessary link to her connection with (M)other Africa. And while she will no longer open herself up to being possessed by her mother, she continues to welcome Damballah's and other gods' presences. These connections are crucial for Marie, who believes that "Life is a spiral. The only protection is to become disembodied–to see the self as other. Immortal. Grandmère, my mother, my daughter, and myself–we were all named Marie. The generations are overlapping. Women hand sight down through the generations" (413).

This tension at work here between sameness and differences prompts us to consider the nature of the relationship between the self and the other. The juxtaposition of mother and daughter, mind against mind in one body, in a kind of generational palimpsest, highlights both their similarities and their differences. There has been in recent years a considerable amount of attention paid to the psychological dimension of the processes by which we construct the "other."[10] Of particular interest here is the theoretical suppositions that highlight the notion of other as formative of the self–the notion that we can only create or construct an identity by establishing *what we are not*. Or, in other words, that we must have an entity *against which* to define ourselves. Indeed, Marie comes to define herself against her mother's identity. Furthermore, the use of the maternal trope as a crucial element of identity formation resonates with a psychoanalytical method of understanding relationships between self and other through the triad of mother, child, and sexuality.

[10] The thematic scope of this paper does not allow me to explore the breadth and variety of recent racial theories. And my choice to address only a limited portion of recent theories about the other should not be understood as a reductive treatment of the field's extent.

In many psychoanalytic approaches (Freud, Laplanche, Klein) the first other is the mother. It is within this relationship between mother and child that sexuality develops, a process that eventually wraps the child's understanding of sexuality in an aura of otherness. Ruth Stein attempts to retrace the immersion of sexuality in the relationship between infant and mother so as to shed light on what she considers to be the uncanniness or otherness of sexuality.[11] "Sexuality, no doubt, has an otherness to it that makes it hold a particular poignant and unique place in experience, in one's relations, and on many planes of imagination" (595). The enigmatic, indeed seductive mother and child relationship plays a crucial role in the constitution of the child's identity. Target and Fonagy write that "unconsciously and pervasively, the caregiver ascribes a mental state to the child with her behavior; this is gradually internalized by the child, and lays the foundations of a core sense of mental selfhood."[12] Stephen Frosh insists on the causality of the (m)other/child relationship in the formation of subjectivity. "Something passes between them, this other and the subject, a kind of code, glittering enigmatically, attractive and elusive, seductive and irreconcilably alien. In this passing between, it becomes clear just how much there can be no subject without the other; instead, it is *from the other* that the subject comes" (399).

Marie's encounter with her (m)other, which displays the sexual nature of the mother/ child bond in a provocative way, helps her come into her own subjectivity. Yet at the root of this self/other confrontation lies a deep concern with sameness. The

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[11] Many psychoanalytic studies have described sexuality as originating in the infant's relationship with the mother. See for example: K. Silverman, *Male Subjectivities at the Margins*; J. Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*; R. Stein, "The Poignant, the Excessive, and the Enigmatic in Sexuality."

[12] Target and Fonagy quoted in Stephen Frosh, 396.

repetitive naming of Marie through four generations of women, all answering the same call to perform the work of Damballah, results in a merging of one into the other, of a kind of eternal continuation of "Maries."

Alongside Marie Laveau's narrative runs the "Othered" narrative of Brigette and Antoine DeLavier. Here, the formal dimension of the text mimics the thematic concerns of the novel. The superimposition and eventual intersection of these two narrative strands also performs a sort of dangerous intimacy, or creates a zone of contact that allows for bodies and minds to overlap in a way that threatens annihilation.

The relationship between Brigette and Antoine–the orphaned twin daughter and son of a prominent Southern gentleman–is also defined by transgressive sexuality, the absent mother, and the tension between difference and sameness. Antoine and Brigette DeLavier have both suffered the loss of all parental figures–first their mother who died in childbirth, and then later their aunt and their father. As twins, they have come to seek solace in each other's arms, but the comfort they find in the other reaches a level of intimacy that will eventually prove fatal:

> after Father's funeral, Brigette had hidden in the attic . . . Antoine had found her. He'd still been in his mourning clothes. To her adoring eyes, he'd looked handsome, heroic, and mysterious. He'd touched her gently. She'd pressed against him, enjoying caresses on her face and hair. At first, she'd been shocked when Antoine touched her between her thighs. But he'd made her feel such pleasure. She'd been afraid too, that if she asked him to stop, he'd stop loving her. Then who would she have? (195)

The incestuous relationship between Brigette and her (br)other will last five years before Brigette becomes pregnant. Until then, she thought "their alliance had been something special and strangely chaste in its sexuality." She had interpreted her infertility "as a sign from God that their relationship was of a different, less sinful nature. But that was changed now" (195).

Brigette observes that "as twins, it was more a case of loving one's self" (195). In fact, she asks how she can resist loving him, "He's so much like me" (233). Yet, conflictingly, she also feels, at times, that she doesn't know her (br)other at all. "Why should you?" he responds, "we're twins. Two peas in a pod, yes. But not the same person" (196).

Antoine, unlike his sister, does not consider their sexual relationship sinful. Or if he does, the fear of divine retribution does not overpower his lust for her. Antoine's sexual obsession with his twin, with the "sameness" she represents, stems from a traumatic boyhood sexual experience involving, this time, the true other. At age fourteen, his father threw him into bed with "three black whores," in a room "dense with cigar smoke and clove-laced snuff," while "Father and his friends watched. I hated Father then. Have ever since. When I abruptly squirted my seed, those dark whores laughed at me. Everyone laughed. I pay back every black bitch I can, for those two laughing" (191-2). But even to his sister, "he couldn't admit how wildly fascinated he'd been by the dark women; he couldn't admit that the fear, mystery, and pleasure of that evening had never been equaled since. Except when he made love to his sister" (193). The extreme "otherness" of Antoine's first sexual experience, at least in the context of nineteenth century Louisiana gentlemen culture, can only be compensated for by an equally extreme experience of "sameness." Yet the contrast between these two excessive opposites will never be reconciled, will never achieve a balanced tension between self and other, between sameness and difference, or between the beneficial absorption of the other and its potential for annihilation, that the novel seems to be seeking.

The two narrative strands of the novel merge when Brigette summons the Voodoo Queen's help to abort her unborn child. Brigette must conceal her pregnancy from her husband, Louis DeLavier, lest her relationship to her brother Antoine become exposed. There is no chance that Louis will believe the child is his, as all his efforts to consummate his marriage have been unsuccessful. The marriage between Brigette and Louis is purely one of convenience. After the death of their father, the twins find themselves without financial resources. And although Antoine hates the idea of giving his sister in marriage to a cousin he despises, they both agree that the arranged marriage will provide not only desperately needed funds, but also a cover for the siblings' incestuous affair.

The meeting between the two women, and the sexuality that arises from it, is dramatized by the fact that they are possibly half sisters.[13] When she first meets her, Marie comments that "Brigette was to Marie as Marie was to the Virgin. Estranged. Opposites"(218). Yet later, it is their similarities that are brought to light, "Brigette was a white version of her. Marie's sins were being mirrored by a ghost" (234). This tension between sameness and differences is again played out in the realm of sexuality. The two women, one black one white, are lying in bed next to each other. Despite the fact that this situation "seemed natural" to Marie, she still wonders, "what was she doing here, feeling the rise and fall of another woman's chest?" While she does resist the impulse to "lay her head on the golden-haired crotch" (233), she does succumb to "kiss[ing] Brigette's exposed neck, her pale lips" (235).

[13] Antoine tells his sister about their father's affair with the great Marie Laveau, a rumor that made their mother and aunt "retir[e] to bed for a month" (191). The only fact that we know about Marie's father is that he was white. The narrator tells us that, to take revenge on John, her mother had an affair with a rich white man, an affair out of which the young Marie was conceived.

Marie refuses to help Brigette abort her child; "no religion should tolerate a child's death" she tells her (235). But the child and its mother will die in childbirth, despite Marie's effort to keep them alive. On her way out of the DeLavier house, she runs into Louis, Brigette's husband. For years, Louis has searched for the "brown girl" he first encountered on the streets of New Orleans. At last, she is "no longer a ghost, a mere memory" (236). He begs her to stay and talk for a while, and she does. Yet what ensues deceives our expectations; while the relationship between them becomes dangerously intimate, it never become sexually so.

Marie and Louis are racial, gender, and religious others. Louis, a stern, white, wealthy man and staunch Protestant, believes that voodoo is evil. He is "not certain that Christianity has all the answers, but it provides rules of conduct. It civilizes people who are unable to think rationally on their own" (240). Marie, a black, poor adulteress, worships the snake god Damballah, and angrily wonders if Louis knew that "indians were being slaughtered, enslaved . . . that every day thousands of blacks were captured, bound and dragged into slavery," all under the guise of the Christian's civilizing and salvationist impulse Louis patronizingly speaks of. Marie is more than aware of their differences, as when he "laid his hand upon hers; no color against color, white against brown" (243). Yet she also feels their closeness despite the distance that their differences should bring about: "He was beside her again, laying his head on her lap. Marie moaned. She stroked his hair. The weight of his head pressed through her merino skirt. It was as though she'd known him forever,' 'known his anxieties, his eagerness to please, known that for years he, like she, had said 'I'm sorry'" (242). Indeed, he fills a gap in her; "Why did it seem his head had always been there, bridging the distance between her two thighs?" (243).

This image of Louis's head between Marie's thighs, notwithstanding its sexual connotation, also contains an intimation of "birthing" that echoes the other filial relationships in the novel, such as the one between Marie and her mother, Brigette and her brother, Marie and Brigette, who is possibly her half sister, and Marie and John, who used to be her mother's lover. These relationships make us consider the nature of the other, and re-introduce the novel's ambiguous tension between sameness and difference. Is the other truly other? And exactly who is the other? What in fact does define the other? Moreover, the immersion into sexuality of all these (filial) relationships continues to emphasize in one way or another the intricate sexual dimension of the bond between mother and child that develops during infancy, and illustrates Laplanche's suggestion that "*sexuality begins with a question about the other*, about which . . . something cannot be explained" [emphasis in original].[14]

The intimacy of this scene will never move from the erotic to the fiercely sexual, as do most dangerous intimacies of the novel. Unexpectedly, the most obviously Othered relationship in the narrative will never be consummated. Which is not to say, however, that it lacks intimacy. The novel combines the voice of an omniscient narrator with the voice of Louis DeLavier, who, while Marie is on her deathbed, takes down the story of her life. Each new chapter opens with a passage from Louis's personal journal, in which he documents the life of the voodoo queen, setting the theme and tone of the chapter. Marie's story, then, is at least in part spoken in his words. The dangerous intimacy between author/narrator/character should not escape us. Rhodes, an African American woman, mediates the narrative of her black female character through the eyes (and pen)

[14] Laplanche quoted in Stein, 602.

of a white male. There can be no doubt of Rhodes's awareness of the history of appropriation by white patriarchal power of women's and African Americans' experiences. In fact, the appropriation of black people's voice and stories has been the subject of much African American literature and critical theory. Sherley Anne William's novel *Dessa Rose*, along with much of the critical scholarship published about this text, is one such example. Rhodes's choice of narrator performs its own dangerous intimacy, inasmuch as it brings into contact two elements whose proximity threatens the other's annihilation.

Perhaps this particular narrative choice problematizes the platonic nature of the relationship between Marie and Louis. More than any other forces at work in the novel, the tension between these two characters is the most likely to provoke an intimate coming together. For the novel is strongly committed to mending the severed connection between the black and white races. The relationship represents an attempt to introduce the presence of a zone of contact where interracial bonds can be made and nurtured without the constant battling against the forces of annihilation–a force that, with the exception of the one driving this relationship between Marie and Louis, is played out in the sexual arena.

The author's efforts to blur the boundaries between self and other/mother/ brother/ sister/lover certainly unsettle our understanding of the other and highlight the constructed nature of these categories. The dangerous intimacies between Marie and Brigette, and between Brigette and her twin brother, invite us to question concepts of sameness and difference, and the rules that place them on opposite sides of binary oppositions. The relationships between Marie and her mother, and between Marie and the African Gods

that she channels highlight the need to reconnect with the past, but also warn us of the dangers of being invaded, overpowered by it. And the relationship between Marie and Louis DeLavier, dangerously intimate despite its lack of sexuality, struggles to create a space where interracial relations can overcome the violence of their history.

Rhodes's formulation of racial, gender, and class politics remains ingrained in conventional dichotomies of black/white, male/female, empowered/disempowered, embodied/disembodied, Voodoo/Christianity. Yet she brings these binary oppositions together in a way that allows the tensions between them to play themselves out. In other words, despite the fact that she does not work against the grain of dichotomous constructions of the world, she nonetheless resists the (colonizing) impulse to tame the "irrational," the wild and chaotic elements within these binary categories. Certainly, *Voodoo Dreams* performs this task more effectively than Rhodes's second novel, *Magic City*. The juxtaposition of the formal and thematic approaches of these two novels demonstrates the concept I am trying to illustrate, namely that in *Voodoo Dreams* Rhodes works within the constraints of binary oppositions by allowing the oppositional elements to clash with, or to confront, one another without exercising the controlling function that binary opposition, by design, seeks to perform.

Like *Voodoo Dreams, Magic City* also considers issues of cross-racial, cross-gendered, and cross-generational contact, between embodied and disembodied beings. Yet, the kind of daring flirtation with dangerous intimacies displayed in *Voodoo Dreams* loses some of its spontaneity. *Magic City* restrains the intimacies at work in the novel by constructing thematic and formal boundaries against which the powers of the supernatural find themselves impotent. The organization of the chapters along gender

lines–a chapter about men followed by a chapter about women and so on–is one example of such restraint. The format of the novel draws similar divisions between the narratives of black and white characters. Rhodes's attempt to weaken the oppositions between blacks and whites, and men and women is undermined by the control she is exercising over how these binary elements come to interact within the narrative.

Voodoo Dreams stages the confrontation between conflicting elements and imagines the consequences should these confrontations be allowed to proceed though. The novel creates a buffer zone where elements risk suffering not only the violence of their history, but also the violence of their dangerous intimacies. The consequences are often fatal: at times, the elements shatter under the pressure of the narrative forces that bring them together. Marie must sever her relationship with her (m)other in order to protect herself from annihilation. She must kill John, her lover, for the same reasons. His patriarchal abuse threatens her own life, as well as the life of her unborn child. And finally she also murders Antoine DeLavier, whose deranged, uncontrollable abuse of power–racial and sexual–endangers not only her own existence, but the existence of all black people. The novel, then, suggests that the forces with which binary oppositions clash when released from their restraints result in annihilation, in the complete overpowering of the One over the Other–or more accurately in this case, of the Other over the One, since Marie defeats her white and male opponents.

The relationship between Marie and Louis, however, offers hope from the apocalyptic undercurrents of the narrative. Amidst the violence of the unleashed binary forces of the narrative, Louis and Marie tell one another their story. Despite the fact that Marie's story is partially told in the voice of DeLavier, her own voice resonates

throughout the novel. The oscillation between omniscient and first-person narrator suggests that the coming together of dualistic entities need not lead to destruction. In fact, the dual telling of Marie's story intimates that the story of slavery, of the violent history between blacks and whites, cannot be told in one voice, that one story cannot be told without the other.

Charles Johnson's phenomenological approach offers an alternative to working within the confines of binary oppositions. His call for multiplicity, akin to what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as rhizomatic, seems to escape the dualism that Rhodes's narratives confronts. The philosophical force that moves Johnson's narratives forward is based on the concept of multiplicity. Contrary to binary oppositions that emphasize disconnection and opposition, the multiplicity of Johnson's philosophical approach emphasizes intersections and merges together what the binary pushes apart. I find the term rhizomatic useful to describe Johnson's project, inasmuch as the rhizome "is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. It is not the one that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five, etc . . . It is composed not of units but of dimension, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu)* from which it grows and which it overspills."[15] Johnson's *Middle Passage,* for example, takes place somewhere *in between*–moving between continents, caught between temporal zones, involved in processes of identity. The ship on which Rutherford Calhoun embarks is in motion, re-crossing the Middle Passage; the history it revisits expands, swells from the dangerous intimacies that arise between the white slavers and their black captives, spilling its content under the pressure of the encounter, sinking the ship and flooding its

[15] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* 21.

passengers. By the end of the voyage, none of the passengers who have undergone the passage can be reduced to the One, or to its opposite. In contrast to *Voodoo Dreams*, where the danger of annihilation comes from forcing together binary oppositions, here it is the attempt to separate elements that have come so symbiotically linked together that represents the greatest danger.

Similarly to *Voodoo Dreams,* the instances of dangerous intimacies in Johnson's work occur on both formal and thematic levels and also take place, at least in the case of *Oxherding Tale*, in the realm of sexuality. The supernatural in Johnson's novels is more controlled, less spectacular than in Rhodes's. Nonetheless, it also manifests itself in the form of spirit possession and interaction. Both protagonists in Johnson's' texts, Rutherford Calhoun and Andrew Hawkins, will communicate with the spirit of their dead fathers, who will come to them through the characters of Bannon the Soulcatcher and the Allmuseri God held captive on board *The Republic*. These multidimensional figures embody the author's philosophy of the interconnectedness of being. In Johnson's novels as in Rhodes's, the relationships between self and Other are dangerously intimate.

Oxherding Tale and *Middle Passage*

In *Being and Race* Johnson describes black literary traditions as essentializing and hegemonic, even parochial, inasmuch as the authors writing within these traditions often represent a world where whites act and blacks react (7). Too many black writers, according to Johnson, because they fail to explore and represent the changing rather than static image of black experiences, only succeed in replacing old stereotypes with new ones (18) and continue to build a tradition dominated by "strict social formulas and calcified ways of seeing" (120). What Johnson seeks is a form of black art "enslaved to

no single idea of Being" and capable of "adjusting the seminal work of the past to address issues relevant to this age" (122).

Johnson's rewriting of the slave narrative highlights the intertextual nature of its form. The slave narrative is not pure, according to Johnson; it is related to the Puritan Narrative, a form characterized by a movement from sin to salvation. Both these forms are offsprings of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, which also operates on a "movement," this time from ignorance to wisdom (*OT* 118-9). Furthermore, elements of the sentimentalist genre, the picaresque novel, and the travel narrative leak into the genre of the slave narrative, for boundaries between literary traditions are as porous as they are divisive, Johnson believes. [16] The multigenre characteristics of the form and its structural capacity for movement (from sin to salvation, ignorance to wisdom, bondage to freedom) make it the perfect vehicle for Johnson's mapping of a phenomenology of freedom and for his identity politics. As I hope to demonstrate through the following discussion, both the form he is appropriating and the thematic content of both these novels are emblematic of the author's belief in the intersubjective nature of human identity and experience.[17]

Johnson's appropriation of the form is not without its ironic turns. Many of the conventions associated with the slave narrative become, in Johnson's work, sometimes thematic devices, sometimes parodic play.[18] I would like, then, to briefly discuss the

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[16] For various discussions on intertextuality see Michael Awkward, *Inspiriting Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels*; Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*; Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*; Madelyn Jablon, *Black Metafiction: Self-Consciousness in African American Literature*; Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*.

[17] See Johnson, "Philosophy and Black Fiction," and "A Phenomenology of the Black Body," for more on Johnson's identity politics and theory of "universality."

[18] Ishmael Reed is perhaps best known for parodying various elements of the black literary tradition(s), including the slave narrative genre. Reed's *Flight to Canada* is a parody of the slave narrative and of *Uncle*

author's playful manipulation of conventions. His revising of the slave narrative genre cannot be separated from his philosophy of multiplicity; it is meant to free the slave narrative genre from the oppositional agenda that has been driving it, and to expose the veiled multiplicity of its form. I will subsequently move on to a discussion of his more fundamental concerns, namely the breaking down of boundaries, the intimate merging of such oppositional elements as the mind and body, and the self and other. As Rutherford Calhoun teaches us, a world that operates on the concept of "*me* versus *thee*"–of binarism, polarities, dualism–is a world that "places upon [the] people a shackle, a breach of virtue, far tighter than any chain of common steel"(140).

Conventionally, the slave narrative opens with information–or more accurately, with the lack of information–concerning the ex-slave's childhood. Because slave children were often separated from their family at a very young age, or because they were often the result of a (forced) sexual encounter between the white master and his female slaves–a fact that the master did not wish to advertise–the slaves could seldom lay claim to their biological origin. The opening scene of *Oxherding Tale* is a feast of playful variations on these conventions of dubious parentage and miscegenation. After having too much to drink late one evening, Jonathan Polkinghorne suggests to his butler-slave George Hawkins that each spend the night in the other's sleeping quarters. George, obeying his master's "suggestion," climbs the stairs of the Big House, gets into bed, and helps himself to Anna Polkinghorne, Jonathan's wife. Anna is quite responsive to the

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Tom's Cabin; his first novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers,* is, according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a parody of the confessional mode, a fundamental and underlying convention of Afro-American narratives; and *Mumbo Jumbo* parodies, among other things, notions of intertextuality. See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* for an in-depth treatment of Reed's work, and Bernard Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition,* for a more general one.

lovemaking, at least until she realizes that it is George, not her husband Jonathan, who is "plowing on" and whom, in the heat of passion, she has "soldered herself to" (6). Anna was "never quite herself again" after the incident. She confined her husband to one wing of the house and, after giving birth, sent the child to live with his father in the slave quarters, never to speak to him or see him again. This, we are told by Andrew Hawkins, "was my origin" (7). The dangerous intimacy out of which Hawkins was conceived destroyed the life of his father, who, after years of working for the Polkinghorne as a house slave, was sent back to the fields. It also shatters the life of Anna Polkinghorne, who will never recover from the ultimate sexual and emotional transgression a white Southern lady, so she believes, could suffer.

Andrew Hawkins does, in accordance to slave narrative conventions, relate his flight to freedom as well as his dedication to helping free others. His intentions are, upon first arriving at Leviathan, to earn enough money to buy George, Mattie, and Minty, the girl he wishes to marry, from Jonathan Polkinghorne (and Calhoun secures, from Papa Zeringue, the freedom of the three Allmuseri slaves who survive the Middle Passage and the sinking of the ship). Yet Johnson refuses to allow his protagonists the liberty of wallowing in the debilitating condition of being slaves. James Coleman explains that in Johnson's view, black individuals should not "emphasize their victimization, position themselves appositionally to whites, and focus so much energy in the struggle against whites." These kinds of narratives, he continues, "stereotype black characters and their experience by emphasizing oppression and struggle" (633). This, believes Johnson, is a form of bondage. George Hawkins exemplifies this philosophy–a philosophy that is crucial to understanding Johnson's quest for freedom. His father, Andrew explains,

"chose misery"; he "needed to rekindle racial horrors, revive old pain, review disappointments like a sick man fingering his sores" (*OT* 142). It is this "emotional" bondage, rather than his physical one, that makes George a slave.

If slave narrators share a common yearning for freedom, they also share a common hunger for literacy. Literacy helps the slaves prove themselves worthy of the freedom they so desperately seek. "Sheer literacy," argues Henry Louis Gates Jr., "was the very commodity that separated animal from human being, slave from citizen, object from subject" (quoted in Barrett, 418). Olaudah Equiano, James Pennington, William Craft, and Frederick Douglass, all have stressed the fact that illiteracy greatly disabled them and have stressed "how they felt the need to, once they slipped their bonds as slaves, satisfy their hunger for education" (Morgan 76).[19] Learning to read and write stands as a turning point in Frederick Douglass's life and brings him to finally identify "the pathway from slavery to freedom." But unlike his master Mr. Auld, who believes that education will "*spoil* the best nigger in the world," Jonathan Polkinghorne hires a private tutor whose sole responsibility is to educate Andrew (*Narrative* 78). Yet Auld might have been right after all; education does make Andrew "restless and unquiet," dissatisfied with his conditions,

> soon all life left my studies–why I couldn't say, but I had, at least, this theory: these vain studies of things moral, things transcendental, things metaphysical were, all in all, rich food for the soul, but in Cripplegate's quarters all that was considered as making life worth living was utterly wanting. And so I became restless and unquiet. (*OT* 13)

[19] Although Morgan makes this claim, she also specifies that it is a typically "male" hunger and argues that scholars ignore issues of gender when underlining the importance of literacy as a central theme in all slave narratives. "While male narrators accentuate the role of literacy, females stress the importance of relationships," argues Morgan (76).

Andrew realizes that a sophisticated intellectual life cannot fulfill the needs of one who does not own his body, for the mind does not hold the power to free the body.[20]

The mind, through literacy, can extend itself beyond "the constricted limits and conditions of the body," but this extension cannot completely transcend the limitations of a body in bondage. Because the identity of a slave is forced to reside at the level of the body, or because the body "holds the ultimate terms of identity for African Americans," one who pursues a "life of the mind" while his body is still in bondage must confront the resulting gap, a mind/body split.[21] Total freedom, for Andrew, and ultimately for Johnson, cannot occur if the mind is severed from the body. Cynthia Willett would agree: " If the self is fundamentally embodied," she insists, " then to strip the self of its [physical] force is to destroy it" (134).

Douglass, Willett argues–and Johnson, I will later argue–negotiate this mind/body split by deconstructing the notion of a moral self that is either directly or dialectically grounded in the rational will. For Douglass, she writes, "the freedom of thought for the black slave begins with the intensification of desire and its expression in the will to resist degradation through the moral, physical, or political force of struggle" (135). Douglass proposes to his nineteenth-century audience a conception of humanity that includes the element of force–physical force used to resist abuse to one's humanity–an element which is essential to the assertion of one's "manhood": "A man, without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted, that it cannot *honor* a

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[20] Hegel, however, might disagree with this line of argument. In the master-slave dialectic, Hegel believes that the (white) slave, motivated by a desire to withdraw from reality, is able to "turn inward, sever the mind from the flesh, and devote himself to abstraction" (Willett 134). For an interesting reading of Hegel's treatment of slave stoicism, see chapters five and six of Cynthia Willett's *Maternal Ethics*.

[21] Lindon Barrett, "African American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority," 419.

helpless man, although it can *pity* him; and even this it cannot do long, if the signs of power do not arise" (*Bondage* 246-7).

Douglass's merging of body and mind in the projection of a moral self resisting oppression is best displayed in his fight with the slave-breaker Covey.[22] Similarly, Andrew Hawkins also engages in a physical confrontation with his master, Flo Hatfield. But in yet another ironic, manipulative twist, the confrontation occurs while master and slave are engaged in sexual intercourse. Flo Hatfield has made of Andrew her sex slave, a situation he refers to as being "in the service of the senses." After a purely metaphysical education from Ezekiel, his tutor, Andrew is now allowed to undergo an "education of the senses," one that is necessary to re-establishing the equilibrium between body and mind: "Lovemaking at Leviathan, after Flo Hatfield closed her shutters, locked her doors, and spread herself in an X on the sofa, was exactly the inverse of my training–all thought and cognition–at Cripplegate" (*OT* 64).

Under Flo's tutelage, Andrew learns the ultimate merging of the senses and the intellect: "Caresses that stripped the skin of movement. Silenced it . . . The body (for Flo) was the touchable part of the spirit; the spirit the untouchable part of the body. Could thirst and hunger fit into American transcendentalism? Could desire and the body be accepted, contrary to the texts I'd studied, as Ways to celebrate man's incarnation?" (64). Andrew wonders if knowledge, philosophy, and wisdom can be experienced, felt, tasted through sexual desire and pleasure. His experiences with Flo teach him that there is, "paradoxically, something of the pursuit of truth in a good lay, an epistemological

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[22] "This battle with Mr. Covey," Douglass writes, "was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood" (*Narrative* 112).

edge in exposing a woman stitch by stitch to the lamplight, as if knowledge had an affective tone (*Begriffsgefuhl*), was somehow *delicious*, and the lover as sincere a seeker after wisdom as any physicist" (72).

Here, Johnson's instance of dangerous intimacy seems to endorse the possibility for an epistemic eroticism (or erotic epistemology) but not without warning against the dangers of a cognitive practice completely immersed in corporeality.[23] Flo is defined in terms of desire. For her, "making love can be used as a way of incorporating others within oneself." Her sexual impulses are tinged with an element of cannibalism, emphasizing this notion of incorporation, or ingestion. She is cannibalistic, Ashraf Rushdy argues, "insofar as each of her reflections on black men is couched in terms of appetite. She 'feeds' on her slave/lover's anxiety (39) and looks at her slaves 'like a woman comparing chunks of pork at Public Market' (41) or as if one of them were 'a six-foot quiche' (42)."[24] The dangerous consequences of Flos' cannibalistic impulses, like those faced by Marie Laveau in *Voodoo Dreams*, threaten the annihilation of one by its other, or the complete absorption of one by the other. There must be, Johnson seems to tell us, a balance.

Johnson's narrative seeks to problematize the mind/body, metaphysical/physical, or rational will/desire dichotomies by transposing these oppositional elements within a space of multiplicity. The Soulcatcher embodies such a space. Bannon the Soulcatcher is

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[23] The "medical" or scientific language with which Andrew describes lovemaking with Flo in the previous paragraph ("exposing a woman stitch by stitch to the lamplight," "and the lover as sincere a seeker after wisdom as any physicist") could be read as his own, as well as the author's, attempt to partly ground the telling of this intensely physical experience in an intellectual and pragmatic discourse so as to prevent a too deep immersion into the realm of physicality or corporeality.

[24] Ashraf Rushdy, "The Phenomenology of the Allmuseri: Charles Johnson and the Subjects of the Narrative of Slavery," 388.

not satisfied capturing and killing the bodies of escaped slaves without first capturing their souls–for his capture would not be complete without apprehending all layers of dimensions of his victims. The novel also seeks to dissolve the boundaries between self and other. For Johnson, the self/other dichotomy prevents humans from attaining "true" freedom–one that exceeds "the blatant selfishness they called individual freedom"–for individual freedom, like individual identity, does not exist. Johnson does not believe in the ego: "I think it's a theoretical construct," he comments, "And if there is such a thing as identity, I don't think that it's fixed or static; it's a process. I think it's dominated by change and transformation, more so than by any static qualities" (Little 161). For Johnson, identity is "a verb and not a noun," and it is "cumulative" (162). Thus, according to Johnson, only after we are able to break down the barriers between the self and the other can we begin to enter this process of transformation, of metamorphosis, with each new contact adding an additional layer to our identities. The idea here is one of multiplicity, irreducible to any of its components. The failure to accomplish this state of multiplicity is what enslaves George Hawkins and eventually leads to his death at the hands of the Soulcatcher: his "life-long hallucination that *Thou* and *That* differed;" his insistence on "seeing distinction;" his inability to merge with the other and, ultimately, to become the other.

In *Middle Passage,* Johnson's philosophy of "intersubjectivity," or of "interexperience," really thrives. In fact, what better way to display a theory of the interrelatedness of the races and the intersubjectivity of human beings than to use the moment at which black and white destinies became intertwined: the crossing from Africa to the New World, the Middle Passage. As Carl Pedersen argues, the re-telling of the

Middle Passage allows for a negotiation of the space between colonizer and colonized and offers "a reconceptualization . . . that stresses cultural connections rather than artificial polarities" (239).

In *Middle Passage,* Rutherford Calhoun, a newly freed slave, embarks on the *Republic,* a ship bound for the Guinea Coast, hoping to escape the "bondage of wedlock" that awaits him on land.[25] The ship is a slaver on its way to take on a cargo of Africans from the tribe of Allmuseri. Here, Calhoun's quest for freedom and discovery of the self commences.

The Allmuseri are a fictional ancient African clan who embody what Coleman refers to as "Johnson's liberating universalism" (635). Their philosophy–which has evolved through millennia–is one of "accumulatedness" of identity, one which does not account for "divisions, individuality, or autonomy" (Rushdy 373). The Allmuseri's vision of Hell, explains Calhoun, is "the failure to experience the unity of Being everywhere" (they have, we are told by Andrew Hawkins, "no words for *I, you, mine, yours*). They had, consequently, no experience of these things either, only proper names that were variations on the Absolute" (*OT* 97)). Although Calhoun confesses that he had, at first, regarded their culture "as a timeless product, as a finished thing, pure essence or Parmenidean meaning" he soon realized that just as he is himself changed by the encounter, so are the Africans:

> Ngonyama and maybe all the Africans, I realized, were not wholly Allmuseri anymore. We had changed them. I suspected even he did not recognize the quiet revisions in his voice after he learned English as it was spoken by the crew, of how the vision hidden in their speech was defecting or redirecting his own way of seeing. Just as Tommy's exposure to Africa had altered him, the slaves' life among

[25] Calhoun fleeing bondage on a slave ship, a slave ship whose expedition is financed by a black man, is another one of Johnson's ironic plays.

> the lowest strata of Yankee society–and the horrors experienced–were subtly reshaping their souls as thoroughly as Falcon's tight-packing had contorted their flesh during these past few weeks, but into what sort of men I could not imagine. No longer Africans, yet not American either. (*MP* 124-5)

The Middle Passage had altered the cultures of Americans and Africans alike, binding them, in the words of Pedersen, "in an uneven, yet symbiotic relationship" (225).

Pedersen's term "symbiotic" helps me illuminate the mutuality of the relationship that Johnson is trying to achieve. There is, in Johnson's philosophy of interexperience and intersubjectivity, something seeking to penetrate below the surface of the skin, an exchange that operates on the cellular level. The Allmuseri, Calhoun tells us, are "as a clan-state,"as "close-knit as cells in the body," and each separation is like "an amputation or flaying of skin" (58). The novel's perpetual references to, and graphic descriptions of, body fluids and bodily functions, as well as the instances of cannibalism are, I argue, ways to dangerously, intimately, and physiologically link bodies, identities, destinies. In her anthropological study of the Andave-Anga of Melanesia, Pascale Bonnemère demonstrates how the circulation of bodily substances underlies practices that pertain to the concept of kinship. She writes that "theories about how blood, semen, spirit, life-force, image, 'double-self' (Panoff, 1968) and other components of the person are transmitted, underlie theories about how an identity is shared" (160). It is this idea of sharing and its role in the (trans)formation and transmission of identity that I am drawing on here.

Hayden White describes how our cultural practices of controlling the production and exchange of bodily fluids corresponds to our ideological construction of the self/other dichotomy:

> the human body . . . can be defined in terms of the nature and quantity of the liquids it exudes . . . Indeed, a whole spate of crucial taboos runs upon superstitions about

> the nature, quantity, and powers of bodily fluids. Perhaps it is not so much death as rather leakage of the body that is the source of ontological anxiety. What would normal tears, sweat, urine, faeces, blood, snot, cerumen (earwax) consist of? The body leaks, even when it has not been perforated, punctured, or otherwise penetrated . . . The care, control, disposal, and cultivation of the body's effusions provide the basis of all "culture." (234)

Hence, to allow bodily fluids to freely circulate and to leave bodies unprotected from the penetration of these fluids is to deconstruct, or work against, cultural conceptions of the self's permeability against the other–a permeability that prevents identities from mutating, from metamorphosing, from becoming a verb, from finding a balance between rejection of, and annihilation by, the other.

During the entire the trip to Africa and back, members of the crew and of the "cargo" are exposed to each other's bodily substances. Excrements, vomit, pus, blood; the skin a meek protection against the invasion of contamination. In fact, the skin, weakened by the horrific pressure of this cultural encounter, disintegrates and liquefies, bones and organs tuning into "quivering masses of jelly" (*OT* 177), the body no longer capable of containing its identity. In the following scene, Calhoun, helping to cast the dead body of one of the Allmusseri overboard, experiences the illusionary nature of divisions:

> I gripped the boy from below, slipping my right hand behind his back, my other under his thigh, so cool and soft, like the purple casing of a plum, that my ragged, unmanicured nails punctured the meat with a hiss as if I'd freed a pocket of air. A handful of rotting leg dropped into my hand . . . That bloody piece of him I held, dark and porous, with the first layers of liquefying tissue peeling back to reveal an orange underlayer, fell from my fingers onto the deck . . . My stained hand still tingled. Of a sudden, it no longer felt like my own. Something in me said it would never be clean again . . . . (123)

Calhoun's hand has been contaminated by the fluids of the dead boy, by the identity of the other, and as a result his hand "no longer feels like [his] own." The feeling that his hand will never be clean again, however, stems from more than self/other contamination;

Calhoun begins to understand that his involvement in the boy's death makes him complicit with the viciousness of the slave trade. This is what ultimately taints and diseases him. Scraping "the boy's moist, black flesh off [his] palm" with the blade of the knife, or slicing his hand off to throw it into the ocean, will not remove the taint.

If the body's porousness allows contaminants *in*, it also allows for their expulsion: "I stumbled into my trousers, then made my way outside onto the deck . . . then stumbled down to the orlop, its tainted air filled with buzzing insects like floating plankton, burning my lungs. As I squatted there, my head swung into this cesspool of swishing fecal matter, I brought up black clumps I can only liken to an afterbirth of a living thing aborted from the body" (178). The images here are of more than contamination from bodily substances and fluids, they are of aborted identities, of cleansing *from* contamination. Calhoun is purging his "womb" from the "individual self" that has inhabited it, the self that lied, pilfered, and enslaved others, making room for a new identity that is the product of cultural encounters, shared identities and experiences or, in other words, of contamination. "The voyage," Calhoun later realizes, "had irreversibly changed my seeing, made of me a cultural mongrel, and transformed the world into a fleeting shadow play I felt no need to possess or dominate, only appreciate in the ever extended present" (187).

For the intersubjective process to take place in a way that will lead to freedom, the process of penetrating and becoming has to involve an element of reciprocity, of sharing– and here we find the balance necessary to protect against the destructive forces of dangerous intimacies. The cannibalistic act of eating Cringle does not result in contaminating the crew with the poisonous effect of ptomaine, for Cringle, knowing

death was near, offered the starving crew the gift of his body for consumption. The symbiotic relationship that takes place between Africans and Americans as a result of the illegal slave trade–the rending of the Africans from their land and families–is diseased and destructive, unlike the symbiotic relationship that ensues from ingesting Cringle. Cringle becomes the "choicest cut of medium raw *steak*" (171-2) giving life, rather than death, to some of the crew members.

The Allmuseri God held captive in a crate below deck in a storeroom stands as the ultimate symbol of the interconnectedness of being. This god, who possesses a most fantastic power of metamorphosis, is the Being through which All is connected. Not only is the God a product of the complex history of its people, but of all the histories that have intersected, at one point or another, with its own. The god cannot relate to Calhoun the story of his father, a member of the tribe of Allmuseri, without revealing the history to which it is connected: "because the God, like a griot, asked one item of tribal history, which he could only recite by reeling forth the entire story of his people, could not bring forth this one man's life without delivering as well the *complete* content of the antecedent universe to which my father, as a single thread, belonged" (169). The identity of the God, who has dressed itself in the flesh of Calhoun's father, who exists as a seriality of images, a "thousand soft undervoices," could not be separated from the whole. Calhoun had to "listen harder to isolate him from the We that swelled each particle and pore of him" (171).[26]

[26] The concept of metamorphosis, which manifests itself in the figure of both the Allmuseri God and Bannon the Soulcatcher, is particularly relevant in the context of Johnson's agenda of the self/other unification, as the following passage by Rosemary Jackson demonstrates: "Behind metamorphosis (self becoming other, whether animal or vegetable) and pandeterminism (everything has its cause and fits into a cosmic scheme, a series in which nothing is by chance, everything corresponds to the subject), the same principle operates, in a sense of correspondence, of sameness, of a collapse of differences. Doubles, or multiple selves, are manifestations of this principle: the *idea* of multiplicity is no longer a metaphor, but is

The interconnectedness of being, fluidity of identities, and symbiotic relationships that flow through *Oxherding Tale* do not stop at Flo's cannibalistic sexual impulses. In fact, they culminate in the scene describing Minty's death. Minty, not unlike the enslaved Africans on board the *Republic* whose bodies liquefy under the pressure of cultural encounter, is "reduced to rotting flesh." A life spent enduring the weight of white dehumanizing cruelties has transformed her identity and her body into a fleshy pulp: "She was disintegrating. Sugar in water. Form into formlessness. Her left leg had separated from her knee, flowed away like that of a paper doll left in the rain . . . The envelope of her skin expanded, stretched, parted at the seams" (166-7). Minty's identity returns to a cellular form, producing a sour odor, "a seaweed odor, as if her cells were breaking open into more basic elements" (165). And, unlike the healing "black clumps" spewing from Rutherford's body in the hull of the ship, the "gush of black vomit" that emerges from Minty's body will not be enough to abort the contaminated identity–the internalized subhuman identity created by whites–that ultimately destroys her.

The scene closes with the Soulcatcher's hand reaching for Andrew as he is bent in grief over Minty's dead body. Andrew, without knowing that the Soulcatcher has entered the room, thinks that the hand squeezing his shoulder belongs to Reb, or maybe his father. But the Soulcatcher's hand could just as well have been Reb's or his father's, for Bannon is a conglomeration of the multiple identities he first pursues and then kills, somehow absorbing them, symbiotically, into his own being. The Soulcatcher's chest is a "flesh tapestry of a thousand individualities," a "concrescence of molecules cells atoms in

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literally realized, self transforms into selves. . . Other persons and objects are no longer distinctly other: the limit between subject and object is effaced, things slide into on another, in a metonymical action of replacement." See *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion.*

concert," a symbiotic space where Andrew can reunite with his father, a victim of Bannon's vicious killing impulses. Like Rutherford who, at the end of his journey, reunites with his father through the agency of the Allmuseri God, Andrew also reunites with his father through the agency of an interconnected being: Bannon the Soulcatcher. It is true that Bannon's linkage of identities is achieved, unlike the Allmuseri God, through pathological violence–Bannon pursues, captures, and kills escaped slaves whose identities he then incorporates into his own. Yet both characters are symbols representing the intertwining of human destinies.

In *Voodoo Dreams* the reconnection with the (m)other becomes the most important for the characters to achieve. Conversely, in Johnson's novels, the most dangerously severed bond is the one between fathers and sons. For both Andrew and Rutherford, these encounters with their fathers are redeeming and healing. Especially for Calhoun who, for fifteen years, "ha[s] searched the faces of black men on Illinois farms and streets . . . hoping to identify this man named Riley Calhoun, primarily to give him a piece of [his] mind, followed by the drubbing he so richly deserved for selfishly enjoying his individual liberty" (112). Leaving his two children behind, Riley Calhoun chose to run away from the plantation when Andrew was a young boy, to pursue a freedom he believed he would find in the free States. But fleeing from his paternal obligations would never make Riley free, for he was seeking "individual liberty." Calhoun, we now understand, had been following in his father's footsteps, pursuing his own personal liberty, first by fleeing Master Chandler's plantation and his brother, then by running away from Isadora and her plot to force him into matrimony. But having made peace with his father's actions in the

smelly, musty room below the deck of the *Republic* allows him to pick up where his father left off and permits him to become a father to the orphaned Allmuseri girl.

Marie Laveau's reconnection with her mother lacks the immediate healing effect that Rutherford's and Andrew's reconnections with their fathers engender. Marie's mother's motives for connecting with her daughter are purely self-serving. She wants access to her daughter's body so as to enjoy the physical pleasures that incarnation permits, such as sexual contact with her ex-lover. Ultimately, however, all of these instances of matrilineal and patrilineal reconnections result in allowing the protagonists the ability to (re)define their own identities. As I argued earlier, Marie's encounter with her mother leads her to define her identity in opposition, rather than in addition to, her mother's. Johnson's male protagonists undergo a similar process–only through an experience of merging of identity and interconnectedness of beings with their fathers can they see that while they are part of their fathers, and their fathers are part of them, they are also different, separate entities, and therefore not destined toward the same path.

The theme of fatherhood, which lurks beneath the surface of both novels, is somewhat troubling. By creating a universe where men run away from, long for, or temporarily assume the roles of fathers and fatherhood, Johnson critiques male desires for individual freedom by locating male freedom in a patriarchal concept of manhood. The novels, particularly *Middle Passage*, are fraught with representations of dysfunctional fathers: Calhoun's deserting father, Isadora's abusive, murderous father, Cringle's over-achieving, tyrannical father. Even Falcon, the "patriarch" of the ship, has incestuous relationships with the young boys in his charge. And Papa Zeringue, whose very name suggests paternalism, sells his black "children" into slavery. The failure to assume a

responsible role as father is referred to by Calhoun as "misspent manhood" (170), suggesting that manhood is intimately tied to fatherhood. Both Johnson's slave narratives carry Andrew Hawkins and Rutherford Calhoun on a voyage from sin to salvation, ignorance to wisdom, bondage to freedom, a quest that eventually culminates into healing and forgiving reunions with flawed paternal figures. And both novels end with the protagonists ultimately fulfilling the roles of providing husbands and caring and committed fathers, roles their own fathers were unable or unwilling to assume. In both narratives, salvation, wisdom, and freedom reside in a heterosexual concept of fatherhood. In fact, by entrenching his narrative in a discourse of patriarchal power, or voicing a need to re-establish such a power, Johnson undermines his project of multiplicity. Indeed, Johnson's narratives bring everything back to the One, to the one Father.

In "Gender-Related Differences in the Slave Narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass," Winifred Morgan argues that women ex-slave narrators emphasize communal relationships as instrumental to their survival while in bondage and to their flight to freedom. Men, on the other hand, tend to display a "rugged individualism." The male narrators tell of their life in, and flight from, bondage, and subsequent accomplishments to emphasize their superior character, intelligence, courage, and will to be free; they portray themselves as the "chosen ones." Johnson, revising yet another tradition, chooses not to endow his narrators with the conventional heroic qualities displayed by the nineteenth-century slaves who escape the horrors of bondage and the perilous flight to freedom. In fact, there is nothing heroic about Andrew's flight from Leviathan. Soiled in his own vomit and excrement, tied to his horse so he would not fall

off, barely able to speak let alone navigate, he succeeds in getting Reb and himself to freedom not on account of any ingenious scheme, courage, or skill, but mostly because he is able to *pass*. Similarly, Calhoun's flight is also devoid of heroism: released from slavery after the death of his master, Rutherford does not need to escape. And what he *is* fleeing from, ultimately, when getting aboard the *Republic,* is a woman.

Male narrators, observes Morgan, rarely talk about their families, they often define freedom as autonomy and, in their narratives, "working with others seemed less valued a trait" (91). Again, Johnson's narrators stray away from conventions. Both Rutherford and Andrew describe family members and other acquaintances and emphasize the role various individuals play in their quest for identity and freedom. Ironically, Andrew and Reb make it to Spartanburg by catching a ride in the back of the slave catcher's wagon. As for Rutherford, he is quite aware of the importance of "working with others," a fact he does not hesitate to share with the readers: "every action had to be aimed at helping your fellow crewmen . . . if you hoped to see shore, you must devote yourself to the welfare of everyone" (187).

If any "rugged individualism" emanates from Johnson's work, it comes from his desire to "raise" himself above, or distinguish himself from, his fellow authors. It is clear that he aims to separate his work from the literary tradition it is (against his wish) labeled under. African American literature, Johnson argues in his introduction to *Oxherding Tale*, had begun to "ossify" in the 1980s into protest fiction and "the literature of gender and racial victimization." But his work, he believes, "pushes harder at the boundaries of invention, and inhabits more confidently the space where fiction and philosophy meet" (xviii).

Not all works of literature, Johnson argues, have been written with the intention of creating a masterpiece. For example, some works are written for popular or commercial reasons, and have been "written too quickly for [the works] to develop those layers of thought and feeling you find in masterworks, to reach that level where no sentence can be pulled out without disturbing the sentence in front of it, the sentence behind it, thereby making the paragraph in front of it and behind it collapse" (Little 181). This quote describes well the philosophy of interconnectedness that Johnson explores in his fiction. All forms of *Being* are linked; no part may be removed without provoking a chain reaction. Just as we should not attempt to understand black and white destinies as separate entities, so too should we avoid compartmentalizing black and white art into different traditions. In Johnson's worlds–fictional and real–all texts are intertextual, and all life is intersubjective.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

To see the myth in the natural and the real in magic, to demythologize history and to reenchant its reified representation.
Michael Taussig

It is impossible for us to assume that these [Africans] are men because if we assumed they were men one would begin to believe we were not Christians.
Charles-Louis de Montesquieu

Because this study analyzes more texts written by black women than texts written by black men, the reader may deduce that the supernatural stands as an aesthetic more willingly embraced by women than by men. Yet I'm not ready to make such an assumption; a much more comprehensive study than the one I am offering here would be needed to answer the questions such a claim would entail. For example, it wouldn't be enough to ask if women use the supernatural more freely than men, it would also become necessary to ask why "the black aesthetic of remembering"[1] remains, when in the hands of black male artists, more invested in a realist aesthetic, and becomes, when manipulated by black women authors, more fluid, evasive, spectral.

In turn, these questions would be difficult to answer without running the risk of getting one's analytical speculations trapped in reductive gender dichotomies. Yes, men–black or white–are more generally associated with the scientific, the pragmatic, the empirical, all characteristics better served by an epistemology of the real, one that must

[1] I borrow this expression from Ahsraf Rushy, "Daughters Signifyin(g) History: the Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," 568.

shun the fantastic, the supernatural, the supranormal in order to insure its continued prominence. Conversely, women have traditionally been associated with the metaphysical, the speculative, the esoteric. It is therefore expected that they would feel comfortable trusting a more ethereal ontology.

Women are also believed to possess a nurturing bond with the forces of nature in general and with the Earth in particular, a belief certainly highlighted in Naylor's novel *Mama Day.* The Middle Passage and slavery have damaged African women's relationship with their native land, a reality that Barbara Christian describes in very maternal terms: "the Middle Passage is the four-hundred-year Holocaust that wrenched tens of millions of Africans from their Mother, their biological mothers as well as their Motherland, in a disorganized and unimaginably monstrous affair" ("Fixing Methodologies" 7). Christian's linking of the traumas of slavery with a connection to one's land and with the concept of motherhood is illuminating. Indeed, Venetria Patton demonstrates that the recurring trope or thematic concern with motherhood in much literature written by black women is a manifestation of the legacy of slavery inasmuch as it attempts to counteract the degendering process that the institution of slavery imposed on female slaves. During slavery, the biological process of birthing was first separated from the gendered act of mothering, "as sexed females, slaves may give birth but only gendered women may mother. Female slaves did not have the option to mother because they were not gendered in the eyes of the slaveholding class."[2] Patton contends that the prominence of the theme of motherhood in the works of past and contemporary black

[2] Venetria K. Patton, *Women in Chains" The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction.* New York: State University of New York Press, 2000. 14

female authors should be read as an attempt by these authors to repair the traumatic blows dealt to the fabric of black womanhood during and after slavery.

While I would argue that Patton's argument problematically conflates womanhood with motherhood, her study nonetheless may offer a point of departure from where to investigate the gender of Narratives of Recovery. The concept of motherhood extends beyond the realm of the family. Black women are understood as not only the mothers of sons and daughters, but also as the Mothers of the land of Africa and the maternal nurturers of a damaged cultural heritage. The overwhelming reach of the traumas of slavery on various aspects of the lives of African American women, because of their relationship to the maternal – actual or metaphorical – may be one way to explain why their narratives seem to exceed in numbers those of their male counterparts.

It would also be possible to offer a much more pragmatic speculation to explain the apparent prominence of black women's supernatural narratives on the contemporary literary scene. In the past two and a half decades, the publishing industry has committed to publishing the works of black women over the works of black men in larger numbers.

But my attempt to draw solid links between the supernatural and the traumas of slavery lingering within contemporary African American culture leads me to engage with a slightly different issue of gender. I'm not so much interested in quantifying the use of the supernatural as it relates to gender as I am in considering the different ways in which black men and women manipulate this aesthetic when they do choose to use it. For example, do the "trickster" ghosts in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* share anything in common with the spiteful phantom haunting 124 Bluestone Road in Morrison's *Beloved?* If these spectral characters are kin, they are distant ones, if only because one is black and

the others are, at least at first glance, white. What about the white ghost wrecking havoc on the Charles family in August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson*? Or the Asian angel granting Mr. John Edgar's wish for freedom in Randall Kenan's impressive story "Things of This World; Or, Angels Unawares." Better yet, what are we to make of the African American artist Terry Adkin's impersonation of the ghost of the white abolitionist John Brown?

By briefly looking at a few more texts or visual productions, this time by black male authors, I will attempt, as a final step in my investigation of Narratives of Recovery, to consider the issue of gender from this particular perspective.

The anachronism (de)regulating Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) performs the same function as the supernatural in Butler's novel or Gerima's film: it collapses the boundaries between past and present in such a way as to make the past more immediate. Reed's conflation of temporal schemes is meant "to establish a link between the historical condition of slavery and the material conditions of contemporary culture" (Spaulding 71). The novel opens with a denunciation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's "theft" of Josiah Henson's narrative, the narrative from which she created *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Not unlike the antebellum slave narrative, which enabled the ex-slave authors to position themselves as subjects within American society, Reed's neo-slave narrative also contemplates the importance of a narrative voice for the black man:

> *"His story. A man's story is his gris-gris, you know. Taking his story is like taking his gris-gris. The thing that he is himself. It's like robbing a man of his Etheric Double . . . Somebody has made off with their Etheric Double, has crept into the hideout of themselves and taken all they found there. Human hosts walk the streets of the cities, their eyes hollow, the spirit gone out of them. Somebody has taken their story."* (8) [italics in original]

This passage projects a somewhat ghostly image, but one that inversely resembles the ghosts haunting other Narratives of Recovery. Rather than describing disembodied spirits endlessly caught between the world of the living and that of the dead, here Reed describes embodied beings robbed of their spirits, destined to continue living as vacuous shells, trapped in a zombie-like stupor.

Interestingly, the "supernatural" beings in *Flight to Canada* are also variations of the typical ghosts that inhabit some of the Narratives of Recovery. The first spectral presence to manifest itself is Mitchell, Mr. and Mrs. Swille's anthropologist son sent to the Congo by his father on a venture from which he never returned. Despite the fact that he seemed to enter the room through the wall, Mrs. Swille did not at first recognize her son as a ghost, since she had not been informed of his death. Mitchell informs her that her husband, who sent him to the Congo to "check for some possible energy resource," is responsible for his death. "Your husband, my father, is one macabre fiend . . . He's a saber-toothed guppy, Mom" (126, 128).

As her dead son creeps back into the wall, she assures him, outraged, that she "know[s] what to do." She confronts her husband at gunpoint, "My son. You killed my son . . . You Moloch! You Mammon! You . . . you Beelzebub!" (133). But her husband soon dissipates her anger through persuasive lulling and cajoling. Sobbing, she drops the loaded gun and dramatically confesses that all she wanted was for him to notice her. As she clings to her husband's chest, yet another ghost makes its appearance. This time, the ghost is of Arthur Swille's dead sister, whose corpse has been the object of his necrophilic desire. The dead sister, dressed in a "filmy scarf, white-death negligee, feet white and ashen . . . her body a silhouette under her ragged white gown, her long

fingernails dripping blood. Her wildcat hair. Her sinister diabolical face," pushes her brother against the fireplace. " Fighting and screaming, Swille backs into the fire. Fire grabs his coattails. Fire is hungry. Fire eats."[3]

But Reed, Rushdy argues, may have been pulling a "trickster ending" on his audience. Indeed, the ghosts haunting this narrative may not be a disembodied, supernatural force after all. "In the Neo-Hoodoo whodunit that is *Flight to Canada*," claims Rushdy, it may be more accurate to say that "the butler did it." Mr. Swille's short, quiet, unnoticeable butler named Pompey may have been the murderous culprit. Throughout the narrative, the butler is described as having remarkable speed: "The boy's fast. He's so fast that some of the people are talking about seeing him in two places at the same time" (175). He's also described as being "a good voice thrower" and expertly adept at performing impersonations of the whole Swille family.[4] Matthew Davis agrees; "not only does Pompey's masquerade as Mrs. Swille's deceased son Mitchell propel her into madness, but his impersonating of Mr. Swille's sister Vivian causes Mr. Swille's death when the spectra-like figure pushes him into the fireplace" (749). The supernatural then is not what it seems; it is nothing but an illusion, a ploy used to cover a black butler's murder of his master.

The supernatural in *Flight to Canada* is kept in check by the author who manipulates every string. The kind of deliberate maneuvering of the supernatural in Reed's novel prevents me from classifying *Flight to Canada* as a Narrative of Recovery. What makes the supernatural suggestive of trauma in Narratives of Recovery is the way it

[3] *Flight to Canada*, 135-6.

[4] For a detailed description of Rushdy's argument, see his chapter on Reed's narrative in *Neo-Slave Narratives*.

attempts to represent the unreal, esoteric manifestations of traumatic recall, the way it yields to the forces that too often overcome the victims during the recall and prevent him/her from narrating, linguistically and in linear fashion, their occurrence. The visible orchestration of the supernatural as a mere illusion, as a ploy to get rid of the master, the abuser, the victimizer may *speak of* the traumas of slavery, but it does so in the voice of the untraumatized, inasmuch as the narrative does not *show* the signs generally present in a traumatic narrative.

The anachronistic story in Reed's novel is set in the years directly preceding and directly following the American Civil War. Yet the world in which these characters live hums with the sounds of twentieth-century technology–Xerox machines, cable TVs, waterbeds, telephones, computers, and helicopters. The conflation of various historical moments–pre- and post-civil war, and post-civil rights America–"allows Reed to deploy Raven's story as a version of his own, forcing us to acknowledge the relationship between the past subjugation of African Americans under the system of slavery and the current cultural practices of appropriation, commodification, and exploitation that restrict the black artist in contemporary America."[5]

Indeed, in the poem that he sent to his master Arthur Swille, Raven writes that he escaped slavery on a Jumbo jet bound for Canada. And while he acknowledges that he's been "Traveling in style/Beats craning your neck after/The North Star and hiding in/Bushes anytime, Massa," Raven nonetheless realizes that he will never be free; not in post-civil war America, not even in Canada.

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[5] A.T. Spaulding, "Commodity Culture and Conflation of Time in Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*," 70.

Unlike Raven Quickskill, who takes a jumbo jet out of slavery, the characters in George Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* catch a flight that will bring them (back) into slavery. Wolfe's 1985 play consists of a series of vignettes, or of "works of arts" displayed as part of the collection exhibited in the Colored Museum. The first vignette, "Git on Board," takes place on a plane. This flight, organized by "Celebrity Slaveship," departs from the Gold Coast and makes "short stops at Bahia, Port Au Prince, and Havana, before [its] final destination of Savannah," (1). The flight attendant, "black, pert, and cute," instructs the flight's African passengers to fasten their shackles, to restrain from "call-and-response singing between cabins as that sort of thing can lead to rebellion," and to abstain from playing any kinds of drums, so as to insure a safe flight across the Middle Passage.

During the flight, the passengers will encounter a few "thunderstorms." "The only way you're going to make it through," Miss Pat informs them, "is if you abandon your God and worship a new one." But the most challenging "turbulence" is undoubtedly the "time warp," which will take the African travelers forward (or backward? it's not quite clear) in time. The time warp will carry them through the American Revolution, the Civil war, the Great Depression, WW1, the Korean and the Vietnam Wars, and the sixties as characterized by Martha and Vandellas, Malcolm X, Miss Diahann Carroll, an explosion in a Sunday school, Martin Luther King and, finally, the breakup of the Supremes.

Despite the bumpiness of the ride and the somewhat rough landing, the flight arrives safely in Savannah. The passengers begin to disembark from the flight as the luggage is thrown onto the conveyer belt. "Mixed in with the luggage," the stage

directions tell us, "are two male slaves and a woman slave, complete with luggage and ID tags around their necks."

As it does in Reed's narrative, the anachronism in Wolfe's play forces us to consider the transposition of past oppressions into present-day culture. And similarly to *Flight to Canada,* the anachronism that conflates past into present is not quite suggestive of flashbacks experienced by victims of trauma. The "time warp" that disrupts the flight to Savannah more powerfully evokes the involuntary recall of past traumatic occurrences than the anachronism does. But once again, it exhibits too much control. The characters experience the flashbacks (or flash forwards) in a linear fashion, from one traumatic event to the next, mimicking the structure of a conventional historical narrative more than a traumatic recall episode.

Perhaps the one element in Wolfe's play more suggestive of the non-linear, non-linguistic manifestations of trauma is the sound of drums echoing through the vignette. The sound of drums, at times only faintly heard, at others growing in tempo, volume, and rhythm, is understood as a sign of threatening, about-to-be-unleashed emotional and physical force. Miss Pat is adamant about controlling the enthralling, rhythmic echoes during the flight: "I'm sorry to disturb you, but someone is playing drums. And what did we just say . . . 'No drums.' It must be someone in Coach. But we here in Cabin A are not going to respond to those drums. As a matter of fact, we don't even hear them. Repeat after me. 'I don't hear any drums.' (The audience repeats.) And 'I will not rebel'" (3). Miss Pat's attempts to "repress" the sounds of a culture damaged but not destroyed by white oppression are in vain. These non-linguistic, uncontrollable hauntings are more characteristic of trauma than the supernatural time warp and the anachronistic conflation

of time schemes. They do what the supernatural accomplishes in Narratives of Recovery: they translate the non-linguistic memories of trauma into a form that salvages some of their authenticity.

The other vignette of interest to me in Wolfe's *Colored Museum* is entitled "A Soldier with a Secret." This scene is haunted, as well as narrated, by a dead soldier who has "come back to life." Junie Robinson, a somewhat dim-witted but nonetheless charming black soldier, has been killed in an unspecified war. Images of multiple wars, from the Spanish-American to the Vietnam War, projected onto a screen in the background, suggest that Junie, like the Last Black Man in Parks's play, stands as an archetypal symbol of all the young black men whose lives were lost during combat.

One could argue that Junie also stands as a symbol of other traumas. The fate that Junie suffers, while it clearly speaks to the horrors endured by black soldiers fighting for a country that refuses to recognize their humanity and their contribution to the war, is also reminiscent of the traumas of lynching that black men experienced during and after slavery. Junie explains how he died:

> I'm off lookin', when all of a sudden I find myself caught smack dead in the middle of this explosion. This blindin' burnin', scaldin', explosion. Musta been a booby trap or something, 'cause all around me is fire. Hell, I'm on fire. Like a piece of chicken dropped in a skillet of cracklin' grease. Why, my flesh was justa peelin' off of my bones. (11)

The images, sounds, and smells of this passage bring to mind similar images from Rhodes's Magic City or Morrison's Beloved, specifically passages describing the lynching of Joe Samuels and of Sixo respectively. Joe smells the "thick smoke wash[ing] over him, as flames peeled back his skin, consuming his swollen hands, leaving charred bone dangling in the cuffs." And Sixo smells, hears, and feels as "His feet are cooking; [as] the cloth of his trousers smokes."

Junie has come back to life to save his black brothers. He now knows "the secret to their pain"; he now has the gift to see on their faces "all the hurt that was gonna get done to them and they was gonna do to folks." He believes that, like Jesus, he's "supposed to go around healin' the hurtin' all these colored boys wearin' from the war"(13). But the only way he knows to heal them from these traumas is to kill them by shooting air into their veins with a needle he stole from the medics.

If they didn't get it right off –she could never explain. Because the truth was simple, not a long-drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells. Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe (163). When Sethe tries to explain to Paul D. why she killed Beloved, she tells him that it was her responsibility as a mother to "keep them away from what I know is terrible." (165).

Junie wants to keep his fellow black soldiers, his brothers, from suffering. And the only place where he believes they will be safe is in death, because "the second [they] die, all the hurtin-to-come just left [their] faces" (13). Unlike Sethe, however, Junie is unlikely to be haunted by the spirits of his beloved dead brothers, for he too now belongs to the world of spirits. Ultimately, the narrative suggests that the traumas suffered by

black men are so overpowering, so thoroughly pervasive, that it is easier to give up one's life than to spend it trying to heal from them.

Randall Kenan's short story "Things of This World; Or, Angels Unawares" (1992) offers a similar philosophical approach about the possibilities of finding freedom in death. John Edgar Stokes, the eighty-six-year-old black protagonist of Kenan's story, is not a slave inasmuch as his life does not belong to a master.[6] But in his hometown in York County, North Carolina, blacks are still denied freedom by whites and are still victimized by the legacies of white power and of Jim Crow Laws. So when one of the Terrell boys shoots and kills John Edgar's faithful life companion, a dog named Shep, and a heartbroken John Edgar retaliates by killing one of Percy Terrell's "prize coon dogs," the reader understands that the black man's fate is sealed even before Terrell's son, "his rage making him the color of raw beef," begs his father to "kill him nigger sombitch killing cocksucker nigger Paw Paw do something." Percy Terrell can't believe what has just happened either and tells John Edgar: "You done it now, you ole fart. John Edgar, you a dead man. You'll pay for this, you goddamn fool." (39)

It is only a matter of hours before Percy Terrell and his sons, accompanied by the Sheriff, show up at John Edgar's house. John Edgar's friends, who have assembled around him to support and try to protect him, urge him to hide; "Ain't no telling what they'll do" (40). All of the black men present understand that the presence of the "Law" only provides an illusion of justice; "Looks to me like the two things you're lacking is some white sheets and a cross," Dr. Streeter tells the delegation of white men who have

[6] Slavery is only one generation removed, however. John Edgar's parents, deceased now for decades, had been born slaves, 46.

come to take away his friend, fearing that once they get a hold of John Edgar, it will be to "string him up" (41).

John Edgar is taken to the courthouse, jailed, but released the next day on five hundred dollars' bail. The events that follow revolve around another character who, amongst this group of black and white characters, stands out like a sore thumb: Mr. Stokes'ss newfound Asian friend Chi. Chi is as unexpected to the reader as he is to John Edgar when the old man finds him in his yard, unconscious and bleeding. After probing the "Chinaman" about how he got there –"I fell" is all the stranger is able to reply–Stokes takes him in and cares for him. We never get to find out who, in fact, is this man, who seems to have been dropped into the narrative as if by divine intervention. " 'You from around here?'" Stokes asks. "No. Just passing through." And when John Edgar pushes a little further, the fallen man interrupts – " 'Oh, how rude of me. My name is . . ." But before he can finish his introduction, he is taken by an attack of dizziness and "crumples over" (29). Every time we think his identity will be revealed, yet another interruption prevents the revelation–a door slams, a visitor arrives, the conversation is redirected away from the stranger. We are forced to accept him, albeit with puzzlement like the other members of the narrative, at least until the more important matters at hand are resolved– John Edgar's confrontation with the Terrell boys.

And this is where it all comes together. Chi has fallen into the narrative to help the old black man resolve this conflict. After his release from prison, awaiting his trial, John Edgar confides in Chi, who has now become, after only a few days, an old, comfortable companion. He confesses that he hated killing that dog. But it seems that all his life, he had been waiting for this very moment, the moment when he could stand up to white

oppression. "It was sho worth it. Worth it to see the look on that ole Terrell's face. I stood up to that cocksucker. Yes sir." And "you know what else?" he asks Chi, "I wisht I could die. Die right now to spite his sorry ass. Yes sir. To show he aint' got not power over death." "Could you?" Chi replies. "Sho nuff could." And here, in the last words of the narrative, Chi's identity is finally revealed:

> When they found Mr. John Edgar Stokes he was sitting upright in a chair by his kitchen sink, his back straight as a swamp reed, not slouching one whit, clutching a large wooden spoon; his eyes stretched wide with astonishment, his mouth a gaping O—though his false teeth had held admirably to the gums—as if his last sight had been something more than truly remarkable, something wonderful and awesome to behold. (48)

The fallen (from the sky) angel had granted Mr. Stokes his wish. Only in death, the story suggests, could this black man defy white oppression and finally find freedom.

It is not unusual for victims of trauma, particularly victims of long-term captivity, to fantasize about suicide. But Herman points out that the loss of the will to live in such circumstances is more akin to an act of resistance and pride than to a "passive" suicidal act. Rather than being an indication that the victim has given up, it is an assertion of defiance of his or her captors. In these cases, "The stance of suicide is active; it preserves an inner sense of control."[7] Russ Castronovo would agree. In an essay that explores the relationship between death and freedom, he describes suicide as "a self-chosen autonomous act" that "has all the trappings of liberty."[8]

Suicide, in the case of Kenan's short story, and the killing of loved ones to liberate them from the pain and trauma of "enslavement," as in "A Soldier With a Secret" and *Beloved*, must be read, in the context of these narratives, as acts of defiance. In August

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[7] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery,* 85.

[8] Russ Castronovo, "Political Necrophilia,"

Wilson's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *the Piano Lesson*, Boy Willie defies white oppression by literally wrestling the ghosts of the past.

The Piano Lesson, like Randall Kenan's short story, is a post-slavery tale. The characters are not themselves slaves, but slavery is only one generation removed. Doaker's father was born into slavery. Doaker, now forty-seven years old, lives with his niece Berniece, named after her great-grandmother, and Berniece's eleven-year-old daughter Maretha. The story revolves around the piano, which in the play stands as both a symbol of enslavement and of freedom. The piano is a valuable possession, as it literally embodies the history of the Charles family, the pictures of whose members have been carved onto its frame. Berniece and her brother Boy Willie, who have inherited the piano, disagree about what is to be done with it. Berniece wants to protect and keep it, despite the fact that she refuses to play it. But Boy Willie, who has come across the opportunity to buy a piece of land from the descendants of the man who used to own the Charles family, wants to sell it.

Initially, the piano was owned by Joel Nolander, until Robert Sutter, wanting to buy his wife Ophelia an anniversary present, traded two of his slaves for it –Doaker's grandmother and father, who was but a young boy then. At first, Miss Ophelia was thrilled with her piano, but soon she "got to missing [Doaker's] grandmother . . . the way she would cook and clean the house and talk to her and what not. And she missed having [Doaker's daddy] around the house to fetch things for her" (43). When she tried to get her slaves back, Nolander refused. In an effort to comfort Ophelia, Robert Sutter asked his slave Boy Willie, the husband and father of the two slaves who had been traded for the piano, to carve the pictures of his wife and child on the piano. Boy Willie, however,

"didn't stop there." He carved the pictures of all the members of the family, as well as scenes from the various memorable events of their lives.[9] Miss Ophelia was excited about the carvings, "now she had her piano and her niggers too. She took back to playing it and played on it right up till the day she died" (44).

The piano remained in the Sutter family until, in 1911, Doaker and his brother Boy Charles stole it. Boy Charles believed that "as long as Sutter had it . . . he had us. Say we was still in slavery." The piano, then, becomes a symbol of freedom, of taking back one's life, one's identity, one's family history. Simultaneously, the piano is also a symbol of dependence and entrapment, for this act of reappropriation cost Boy Charles his life. Sutter hunted him down, found him as he was about to escape on the Yellow Dog train, and killed him. The theft of the piano, as well as the retaliatory murder that ensued, is engraved in the collective memory in the form of a legend–The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. These spirits, believed to be the souls of the black men who died for that piano, sporadically perform, or so the legend goes, vengeful acts. So when Sutter's son, three weeks before the events taking place in the play, fell in his well and died, blacks were quick to credit the Ghost of the Yellow Dog with his misfortune.

The Ghosts of the Yellow Dog are not the only disembodied beings to haunt Wilson's play. The dispute between Boy Willie and his sister Berniece about what to do with the piano summons the ghost of the recently deceased Sutter. The piano had always been an instrument of communication between the living and the dead. Berniece's mother used to ask her daughter to play it for her, "say when I played it she could hear my daddy

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[9] Amadou Bissiri argues that the carvings on the piano, and the story of "bondage, acceptance, and retribution" it tells is, in a way, the family's slave narrative. "Aspects of Africanness in August Wilson's drama: reading *The Piano Lesson* through Wole Soyinka's drama," 264.

talking to her." Berniece now refuses to play it because she does not want to "wake them spirits." Despite Berniece's efforts to keep the spirits quiet, the possibility that the piano might be sold out of the family triggers the spectral return of Sutter, whose family history of oppression is also engraved into the piano.

The apparition of Sutter's ghost forces the Charles family to ponder such philosophical questions as: What use do we have of the past? Or, what purpose does it really serve? Boy Willie wants to sell the past so as to reinvest into a future that would insure his independence–owning his own land would remove him from under the supremacy of white land owners, the very landowners who built their estate on the back of his family's forced labor. But Berniece adamantly refuses to allow her brother to trade the past for the future, especially if it is to be done through a financial transaction. "Money can't buy what that piano cost. You can't sell your soul for money," she tells her brother (50).

The piano will become the medium through which brother and sister will resolve their painful differences, as well as the instrument through which both will finally come to confront, head on, the traumas of the past. Berniece's refusal to play the piano after her mother's death must be read as an attempt to repress the past, to silence its ghosts. So is Boy Willie's unwillingness to consider the piano as anything else than a commodity to be traded for money. Both brother and sister refuse, in their own way, to come to terms with the pain of the history carved into the piano. Until, that is, Sutter's ghost engenders this cathartic process.

Boy Willie will find himself "forced into battle" with the one thing that still has the power to deny him his dream of freedom–the ghost of Sutter who awaits him on the top

of the stairs in his uncle's house. He will courageously "ascend the stairs–'go to the mountaintop'–and defeat this final obstacle to freedom." Devin Boan reads Boy Willie's journey as a slave narrative. The boy's trip from the South to his sister and uncle's house in Pittsburgh to take possession of the piano "bears all the earmarks of the journey his ancestors would have taken a century before. He has come North, just across the Ohio River, seeking not only economic and social freedom but to reclaim the heritage built by his ancestors and stolen from him." All along, "while he had imagined that the piano was his final hurdle, his engagement with Sutter's ghost, or his facing the traumas of the past that Sutter represents, is really what the journey North had in store for him"(269, 270).

Boy Willie could not have defeated Sutter's ghost without the help of his sister. As Boy Willie begins his "life-and-death struggle fraught with perils and faultless terrors," Berniece "realizes what she must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. The song is found piece by piece. It is an old urge to song that is both a commandment and a plea. With each repetition it gains in strength. It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing, for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents" (106). Gathering strength from the force of his sister's song and from all the ancestors it summons, Boy Willie defeats the white ghost.

When the music entered the window she was wringing a cool cloth to put on Beloved's forehead . . . As the voices grew louder, Beloved sat up, licked the salt and went into the bigger room. Sethe and she exchanged glances and started toward the window. They saw Denver sitting on the steps and beyond her, where the yard met the road, they saw the rapt faces of thirty neighborhood women. Some had their eyes closed; others looked at the hot cloudless sky. Sethe opened the door and reached for Beloved's

hand. Together they stood in the doorway. For Sethe it was as though the clearing had come to her with all its heat and shimmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

This physical altercation between Boy Willie and Sutter displays a certain amount of masculine power, and is reminiscent of Wolfe's and Reed's attempts to keep in check the supernatural forces in their narratives. As it did in Wolfe's "Git on Board," the song in Wilson's play signals the presence of trauma more strongly than the use of the supernatural does. Its sudden, involuntary manifestation, its overtaking of Berniece's mind, its fragmented (it is found piece by piece) and repetitive structure, its healing potential, all suggest the distorted, uncontrollable, difficult-to-translate surge of memories that assail victims of trauma–memories over which they have no control and that force them to remember the traumatic events. Furthermore, the fact that the song comes "from somewhere old" and that it is like a "rustle of wind blowing across two continents" links the familial traumas of the Charles family embodied in the piano and in Sutter's ghost to the communal traumas of slavery and of the Middle Passage. It merges, if you will, the past and the present in a kind of simultaneity.

By the end of the play, brother and sister have resolved their conflict. Both now understand and agree that the past must not sit idly, as the piano did for years in Berniece's living room; it must be used. Boy Willie leaves Pittsburgh without selling the piano. For he has learned that, while the past must be used, the past should not be

sacrificed for the future; the piano cannot be substituted for the land he wanted to buy. After saying goodbye to his sister, he tells her, "if you and Maretha don't keep playing on that piano . . . ain't no telling . . . me and Sutter both liable to be back" (108).

Contrary to the Charles family who tries to exorcise the white ghost that haunts their family history, Terry Adkins tries to reanimate, bring back to life, the white ghost that has been haunting his recent installations. Adkins'ss sculpture "recital" entitled "Deeper Still" imagines what might have happened had John Brown's rebellion on Harper's Ferry been successful.[10] "In the aftermath," Adkins speculates, Brown "would have pushed southward deep into slave-holding territory and into Florida, picking up momentum with a multi-racial band of free blacks, runaway slaves, sympathetic whites and Native American allies. To be successful, such a venture would have required secrecy, camouflage, surveillance and other well-thought-out offensive and defensive tactics."[11]

Many of the sculptures exhibited in "Deeper Still" have been constructed, or created, with objects found in Akron, Ohio, on the very grounds where John Brown, in the 1840s, had been a shepherd. The fleece, cowhide, cow skin, and gourds used in Adkins's sculptural pieces are meant to infuse these abstract artistic constructions with the essence of the man whose memory Adkins is honoring.

Because of the nature of Adkins's art form, it is literally impossible to claim that the artist is using the supernatural as a means to recover (from) history. Yet Adkins's

[10] "Deeper Still" was in display at the Harn Museum in Gainesville Florida from October 7,2001, to February 2, 2002. Adkins'ss exhibition is referred to as "sculpture recital" because it combines music, video, installation, and performance.

[11] Exhibition Brochure Essay, 3.

installation, through various means, communicates the presence of trauma. For example, the non-linear organization of Adkins installation is reminiscent of traumatic recall. "I don't work in a linear fashion, in a series of anything" Adkins explains, "I work more in a crystalline way –all these different pieces are tied together, they are facets of a stone, each one of them has its own personality and calls for a different treatment because it's talking about a different aspect of the theme."[12] Indeed, "Deeper Still" inhibits linearity from the moment one accesses the site. The entrance to "Deeper Still" consists of a semi-circular wall that stands in the middle of the pathway, denying the visitor any immediate, or straight-forward, access to the sculptures. The guest must choose another direction – left or right. Here, the exhibition seems to suggest, there are no straightforward, direct interpretations of history. Furthermore, the guest must wander impulsively, spontaneously through the exhibition, as there are no leading pathway through the installation. One goes where one is drawn. Judith Page describes the experience as such: "The viewer's eye is always moving, it never stops. One can move through the exhibition in a very exciting way. It's exhilarating. There are surprising shifts in scale, pieces appear in unlikely places, in corners, overhead, it's very dramatic. You certainly understand . . . how to pull the viewer into the spirit of the installation" (25).

Adkins's installations are multi-sensory experiences. The sculpture entitled "Vocal Form," while it suggests sound, stimulates our olfactory nerves. It displays incense on a copper, silver, and wood structure. But the incense is unlit. The senses, taunted and aroused, must first feel/fill the void of the denied aroma. This feeling of arousal forces us to act as a participant, rather than as a mere passive observer, in the experience offered by

[12] Judith Page, "(Still) Getting Inside Getting Outside: A conversation with Terry Adkins," 25.

the artist. Nothing here is told, spelled out, directly conveyed. Rather, the plethora of sensations leaves us to imagine, to feel, to interpret their meaning. History, the exhibition suggests, is never already written. It is a process always in movement, always being lived, experienced, interpreted. It is both in the past and in the present.

Visitors are invited to experience Adkins's artistic journey through history on a personal level, yet they are simultaneously pulled into the collective experience of history through the many mirrors placed throughout the installation, which allow us to see ourselves in history, to contemplate our role as participants, interpreters, and witnesses of this perpetual process of history.

Sound stands as an important element of "Deeper Still." Our aural faculties are awakened by giant ventilation fans that fill the room with the sound and texture of swiftly moving air, suggesting the constant and hurried movement of time and history, pushed forward and forward, in endless, circular cycles of repetition. Furthermore, "Adkins's dual talents as artist and musician reverberate throughout the exhibition. Some sculptures are made from actual musical instruments, such as 'Underrail,' an elongated wall piece that incorporates two East African drums at either end."[13] The piece entitled "Gallis Pole" "appears to be giant eighth note hanging off the wall." When she first encountered it in Adkins's studio, Judith Page describes that she "could see and hear the music."[14] Adkins, who grew up in a house filled with music and who is himself an accomplished musician, explains that music profoundly inspires his sculptures. "The influence ranges from the literal usage of sounding bodies, like the drums in *Census,* to the symbolic

[13] Brochure essay, 9.

[14] Judith Page, 21.

resonance of the materials themselves. I use parts of musical instruments too–anything from a sleigh bell to the bell of a trumpet fascinates me."[15]

Music, as I have discussed in the context of Wolfe's and Wilson's plays, offers an alternative to translating the seemingly unreal manifestations of trauma into a more conventional narrative form, one that fails to convey their fragmented, non-linear, sudden, multi-sensory manifestations. In the words of Adkins, music brings "disparate things into a harmonious balance of gesture and grace" (Page 21).

Adkins's very approach to creating his *Visionary Recital Project* also evokes the impulsive nature of traumatic recall. He is described as "descending upon" or "flashing into" a town and of putting together entire installations in a matter of days. It is "quick, intuitive and decisive," "charged with lightning speed." His work, unlike most of his male counterparts', is endowed with a quality of abandon. In fact, Adkins relates that "What [he] likes about dealing with a particular subject is that it brings out work that I would never make otherwise. That's what I want to do–to surrender myself to the subtle force of materials, surrender myself to the calling of trying to illuminate themes that I choose to work with, and by surrendering to forces outside myself, I am able to make work that is just as much a surprise to me as it is to everyone else."[16]

Perhaps the most haunting presence of the white nineteenth-century abolitionist in Adkins's installation manifests itself on the one channel digital video that replays the same sequences of flashing, ephemeral images of Adkins impersonating the ghost of John Brown, holding a shepherd's staff and wearing a head of fleece. This "ghostly

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[15] Judith Page, 22.

[16] Page, 24.

incarnation is intimately tied to the sites and the history of Florida. This symbolic figure dissolves in and out of the swamp, the statehouse, the voting booth, the prison and the classroom–those pulsating places where the symbolic possession of power and history are constantly being negotiated" (Brochure 7).

I chose to end my study of Narratives of Recovery with "Deeper Still" because Adkins's act of appropriation, his daring crossing of boundaries, provides me with a suitable transition into some final thoughts. Adkins's decision to recover (from) the traumatic legacies of slavery through the life of a white man reiterates for me an issue that has been floating below the surface of my analysis of many Narratives of Recovery, namely the possibility of interpreting these contemporary texts as attempts to heal not only the traumas of the past, but the complicated and unstable relationships between blacks and whites.

John Brown was willing to "forfeit [his] life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle [his] blood further with the blood of [his] children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments."[17] It is this willingness of this white man to die for the liberation of his black "children" that compels Adkins to conjure up his ghost, indeed to *become* John Brown's ghost. This dangerously intimate contact between the black man from the present and the white man from the past suggests the possibility of reconciliation between past and present and between blacks and whites.

Many of the Narratives of Recovery discussed in this study make a similar call for reconciliation. *Kindred, Beloved, Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage, Eve's Bayou,*

[17] John Brown quoted in Brochure essay, 2.

Voodoo Dreams, Magic City, Mama Day, The Piano Lesson–all suggest that the traumas of slavery are not *contained* within the boundaries of black culture. Contemporary white American culture conditions itself to represent and address the traumas of slavery as injuries that only African Americans must recover from. But many Narratives of Recovery understand and seek to communicate that these traumas exist *in excess of* the realm of African American culture and identity. Whites are symbiotically enmeshed in these traumas and must also take steps to recover (from) them.

The antebellum slave narrative served as a political tool for the liberation of enslaved blacks. In these narratives, ex-slaves appealed to the morality and Christianity of their white oppressors, asking them to recognize the humanity of blacks and to put an end to the institution of slavery. The postbellum slave narrative had a slightly different agenda. The liberated slaves no longer had to plead for their liberty. Rather, they attempted to convince their white countrymen and women that the years of slavery spent "in the service" of their white masters had prepared them well to be responsible, respectable, self-sufficient members of society.

The contemporary slave narrative continues to contribute to the social and political welfare of African Americans in particular way. The Narratives of Recovery set forth a process of healing by re-externalizing the "evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim," a process that can only be performed through an articulation, indeed an integration, of that story in the form of a narrative.[18] Furthermore, I argue that the Narratives of Recovery might also engender a process of healing the damaged relations between blacks and whites. Finally, and partly because of the two previous functions,

[18] Laub and Felman, *Testimony*, 69.

these texts can help change our understanding of and our relationship to the past, an understanding that could, in turn, change the future. If, as Ron Eyerman believes, "how an event is remembered is intimately entwined with how it is represented," this new way of representing slavery many very well change the way we will come to remember it in a not-so-distant future.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lorraine Ouimet is a francophone native of Montréal, Québec. Before joining the graduate student body at the University of Florida, she completed her undergraduate degree at Université de Montréal, and her Masters degree at York University in Toronto, Ontario. Her primary area of research is contemporary African American literature and culture. Her secondary interests include diasporic studies, cultural studies, and new media.

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

L. David Leverenz
Professor of English

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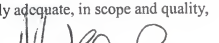

Mark Reid
Professor of English

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Maude Hines
Associate Professor of English

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Mikell Pinkney
Associate Professor of Theater and Dance

This dissertation was submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate School and was accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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